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10¢

Ace-High Magazine

DECEMBER

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

GUN-HIRE FOR HUNTED MEN
EPIC NOVEL OF WESTERN FEUD
by WALT COBURN

THREE WHO FLED BOOTHILL
by PETER DAWSON

PEARSOL-STEELE
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AND OTHERS

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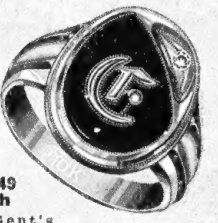

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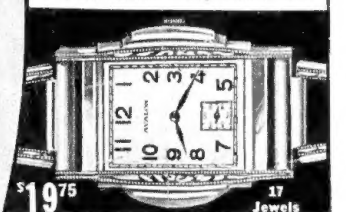

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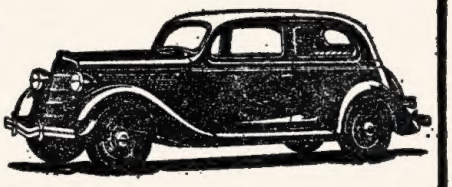

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Ace-High Magazine

Vol. LXXX, No. 2 CONTENTS December, 1937

Complete Western Novel

GUN-HIRE FOR HUNTED MEN.....**Walt Coburn** 10

The range-war storm was breaking over Antelope Creek when Henry Stacy, hangman's fugitive, hired out to rustle ZT beef. . . . But he didn't bargain for cold-blooded murder, and he'd rather die beside honest fighting men—than grow old under a killer spread's protection from the law!

Two Ace-High Novelettes

THREE WHO FLED BOOTHILL.....**Peter Dawson** 48

They'd framed Mark Healy for murder and stolen his sweetheart. He had nothing more to lose but his life. And that was worth no more than the chance to settle a long-overdue gallows-shadowed score—in gunsmoke!

OUTCAST OF THE WAGON CAMPS.....**John A. Saxon** 80

From the cliff-base wreckage of a pilgrim girl's prairie schooner, rose an enmity that would stampede Dan Selkirk's California caravan with spurs of terror—and a precious love worth shielding, even at the cost of death!

Four Ace-High Short Stories

A COWARD GUARDS THE PASS.....**John G. Pearsol** 38

Could chains of iron hold a fear-crazed man—to give his life for another?

THE GUNMAN HELL COULDN'T HOLD.....**Ralph Thurman** 63

Broken in body and mind, Tonto rode on—to earn hell's last reward!

MATE FOR A NORTHLAND KILLER.....**Harold F. Cruickshank** 70

A man and a wolf prowled the icefields on the trail of their doomed mates!

A MAVERICK DARES DEATH.....**Gunnison Steele** 97

Left for dead, Malone heard the killer's challenge—of 4-to-1 gun-odds!

Departments and Features

FRONTIERSMAN'S JUSTICE.....**The Editor** 4

Quick, unerring, by the code his sixguns backed, he made his just decrees.

WAR CALL FOR FEUDISTS.....**Old-Timer** 8

Bravest of the feud clan is the one who has the courage to hold his fire.

OUT-TRAIL CARAVAN.....**A Department** 103

ALL STORIES NEW **NO REPRINTS!**

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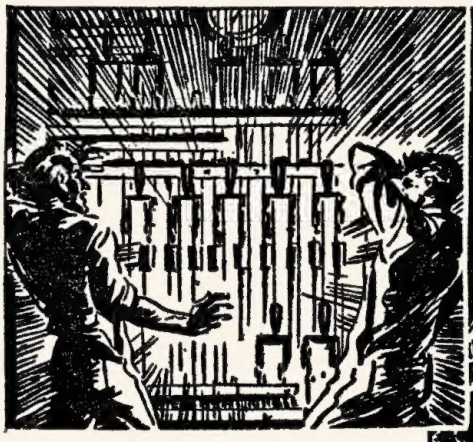
Panic Loomed...The Show Went On!



Crowded Theatre Goes Dark as Fuse Blows

"The dog-and-pony number was finishing," writes Stage Manager Frank M. Polhamius, Jr., of 195 Fuller Lane, Winnetka, Ill., "when an overloaded main fuse blew out. As the stage went black, panic threatened the lives of thousands crowding the full house.

"Part of my equipment as stage manager is my trusty 'Eveready' flashlight. Before the audience could sense that anything was wrong, I called for the curtain, dashed to the wings and played my flashlight on the apron of the stage like a baby spot.

"Fortunately, a dance team was ready to go on. In a split second they were on the stage and going through their routine in the spot furnished by my flashlight. DATED 'Eveready' batteries in that flashlight had lighted my way around dark theatres for many weeks before they were called upon to meet this spine-chilling emergency. So you can bet I realized in those critical moments just how much it can mean to buy batteries that are *fresh* and full of life. No one can ever know how many lives were saved by DATED 'Eveready' batteries that night.

(Signed) Frank M. Polhamius Jr."

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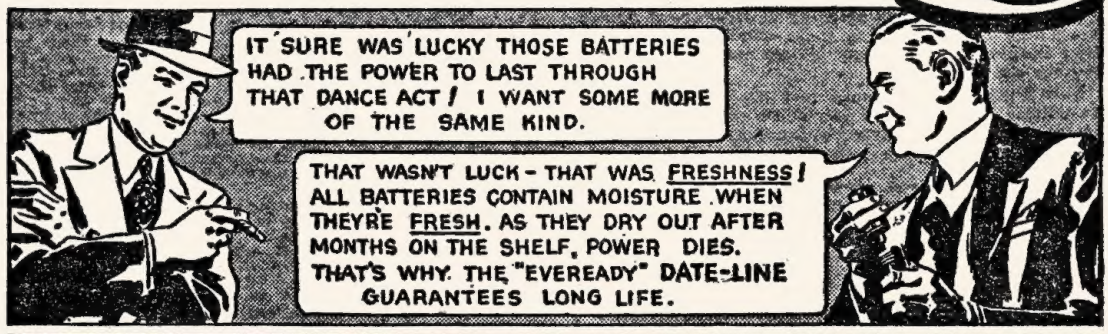
IT SURE WAS LUCKY THOSE BATTERIES HAD THE POWER TO LAST THROUGH THAT DANCE ACT! I WANT SOME MORE OF THE SAME KIND.
THAT WASN'T LUCK - THAT WAS FRESHNESS! ALL BATTERIES CONTAIN MOISTURE. WHEN THEY'RE FRESH, AS THEY DRY OUT AFTER MONTHS ON THE SHELF, POWER DIES. THAT'S WHY THE "EVEREADY" DATE-LINE GUARANTEES LONG LIFE.

FRONTIERSMAN'S JUSTICE

THE physical daring and heroism of the men who tamed the American West will ever remain a classic in manhood. There is no red-blooded man, woman or child who does not thrill to the stirring examples of courage they have left us. But also, from the saga of the Old West, comes another and equally outstanding quality that appeals to the heart of every one of us. It is the primitive, direct, straight-forward sense of justice that pervades the history of the frontiersmen.

In our lawyer-ridden world, we often wonder at the cobweb-like maze of statutes that obstruct the rewards and penalties for right and wrong. We see known hoodlums and criminals freed through loopholes that exist in our overly involved code of laws. And men innocent of wrong-doing are clapped into jail and held there, merely through some technicality of our legal code. The laws of today were drawn in a sincere, exhaustive attempt to deal out justice—but there are too many of them, so many that they sometimes seem to obscure the very aims of justice.

In the beginning of the West, each of the pioneers was a law unto himself. And the fighting irons at his waist were the "peace officers" that enforced his law. In another land or time, such a condition would have meant chaos. But in the frontier's vast wilderness, it was the only way. And full credit is due the early settlers that their clear-sighted resolution, their nobility of purpose, were keen and true enough to know right from wrong—and to fight for the former.

Space allows for one example from the thousands. In Indianola, Texas, at a time when the Lone Star State was overrun with desperadoes, Billy Taylor, notorious feudist, was in jail awaiting trial when a terrific storm came up. Streams flooded their banks, and great walls of water gushed down the usually dry arroyos with devastating force. Hundreds of lives were in danger, and every able-bodied man was needed to help evacuate the imperiled re-

(Concluded on page 6)

How do you know you can't write?

HAVE you ever tried? Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

Or have you been sitting back, as it is so easy to do, waiting for the day to come some time when you will awaken, all of a sudden, to the discovery, "I *am* a writer"?

If the latter course is the one of your choosing, you probably *never will write*. Lawyers must be law clerks. Engineers must be draftsmen. We all know that, in our times, the egg does come before the chicken.

It is seldom that any one becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their insight, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

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THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE. THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in Spare Time*

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CITY..... STATE.....

(Continued from page 4)

gions. They let Billy Taylor out of jail, to help with the work. And he rescued many from drowning.

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Technicalities of the law didn't bother that Texas jury. One law that they knew was the code that is as old as mankind: "If a man helps you when you need help, you fight his fight in his hour of need." It is a law that is close to the human heart.

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THE EDITOR

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War Call For Feudists

IT TOOK twenty years for the simmering Runyan-Harris feud to boil over in bloodshed. For two decades, gray-thatched Bert Runyan and peppery little Paul Harris had cussed each other over their own mess tables; they had talked big and scarey, in town, about what would happen if they ever locked horns. All because Bert Runyan had been robbed twenty years before in Dodge City, after marketing a combined Runyan-Harris trail herd—and had lost seven thousand dollars that belonged to Harris.

Words had been cheap during those twenty years. . . . Then Sheriff Hank Tillyou brought in the body of Rusty Runyan, old Bert's nephew.

Bert was curiously, dangerously silent, out there in the rain as he loosened the pigging strings that had held young Rusty doubled across the saddle—on his last ride in from the Circle R's North Basin line-camp.

"Word come in," the burly lawman was saying, "of a big night drive into the Wild Horse Hills." He paused significantly; the Wild Horse Hills were on PH range. Not by so much as a glance, did Bert Runyan show that he had heard. Tillyou went on heavily, "I backtracked from the pass —an' found him. . . . Reckon your crew will want to make up the posse."

Bert Runyan eased the lifeless body off the saddle into his powerful arms. He bore it into the big house. In another minute he was back on the porch. He was now strapping his gun-belt around his lean waist.

It was coming on dusk. When the sheriff had arrived with his grisly burden, most of the hands were idling around the bunkhouse and corral, waiting for the call to supper. Now they were gathered around Tillyou, out by the corral, looking to their guns as they listened to his blustering story.

Bert Runyan stalked angrily across to the group. He'd never had any love for the brand of county officials who had got into office, election after election, while he and Harris had been snapping at each other.

"Git back to town, Tillyou!" he barked. "The Circle R will handle its own worries. . . . Why didn't you come straight out here when you got word there'd been a night drive through Skeleton Pass?"

"Why, you—" The florid-faced sheriff's eyes narrowed. It was war talk.

"An' furthermore," snapped Runyan, "Sam Ringo was up at the North Basin line-camp with Rusty. Where's he at now?"

"Likely, if Ringo was up there, he was in with the PH raiders."

"PH raiders, my eye!" Runyan snorted. Paul Harris was an obstinate damned fool, but he wasn't a rustler.

"All I know," the sheriff said, "is that Rusty an' half a dozen more of your men ran Paul Harris' boy, Ed, out of Laguna last Saturday night. An' young Ed Harris swore he'd hang Rusty's hide on a fence."

"So what?" Old Bert Runyan glared. He had nothing but contempt for a man who could swallow his anger so quickly. "Now swing aboard your mount, tin-star. Go back an' tend to your crooked gamblin' layouts."

Three hours of hard riding through the drizzling rain brought the Circle R crew to the ridge that looked down on the PH ranch headquarters. There had been no hope of following the stolen herd, with the sign wiped out by the afternoon's downpour. Ranicky old Bert Runyan had other plans.

He reined in at the rim of the slope. "You-all stay here," he instructed his men. "If I ain't back in half an hour, come on down to find out why—with your guns in your hands. Something's almighty wrong down there. Not a light on the place." . . . And he was gone.

Bert left his horse ground-tied at the foot of the slope. He walked cautiously through the rain and darkness toward the hulking shadow of the big house. Fifty feet from the porch, he found the cover of a tree. He had the curious, spine-prickling feeling that eyes were watching him. He picked up a small stone and tossed it out into the roadway.

"What's that? Who's there?" someone called from the porch. There was a shuffling of chairlegs and booted feet.

Bert Runyan smiled to himself. He tossed another stone, a little farther along the roadway. He was waiting for a certain voice. Then it came: "Go out an' see what the hell's goin' on out there."

As three men clumped off the porch, Bert slipped out from behind his tree. He boosted himself lightly over the porch railing, stepped softly to the side of a seated man who held a palm-shielded quirley in his hand.

"Paul," Bert said, "there's a gun in my hand. Don't make a row."

"Bert Runyan!" exclaimed Harris. Then: "You throwed in with that Tillyou crowd in town?"

"Don't get insultin'!" gritted Bert. "You answer this question, an' answer it straight: Where was your boy Ed last night?"

"Ed? Right here, of course. He's been laid up with a sprained ankle for three days. . . . Where's Tillyou an' his slick-tongued crooks? His lyin' deputy come by this afternoon an' said you an' your boys were gettin' ready to raid my Wild Horse Hills herd. He thought I'd send all my men out there to stop it."

One of the men out front called, "There's nothin' here, Paul."

Paul Harris looked at the night-shadowed face of Bert Runyan an instant. "Hunt around a little longer," he told the men out there.

Now there was the flutter of hoofbeats over the thrumming of the rain. Carried by the wind, the sound came from a distance, approaching the ranch.

"Why'd you tell him that?" Bert asked. "Because you thought I'd brought someone with me or because you wanted to hear what I got to say?"

Harris grinned. "Ranicky as ever, ain't you? Sounds like fifteen-twenty riders comin'. They with you, Bert?"

"My men are up on the ridge."

Harris came to his feet. "I believe you, Bert. You always was too damn cocky to be a liar. It's like I thought. That's those damn town crooks, Tillyou an' the rest. They were tryin' to draw me away from the ranch tonight. It's a raid. You better beat it. This ain't your fight."

Bert grabbed Harris' hand. "We're a couple of old fools, Paul. If there's to be a fight, it's both of ours."

"Curly! Slim!" Harris was calling. "Come on in. They're comin'!"

And Bert Runyan was leaving. As fast as he could travel, in the mud, he was making his way back to the slope where he had left his men. And ten minutes later, when the firing broke out at the PH ranch, the Circle R rode to war—on the side of the Harris men.

The account of that fight, in which a high-handed, ruthlessly dishonest town clique was wiped out by the combined crews of two ranches, is written in the history of Laguna County. The crooked gamblers and renegades who had gained control of the principal elective offices and were milking the county, under the domination of Sheriff Tillyou, left that night, hell-bent for Mexico—or stayed forever, buried under PH turf. Tillyou himself and his spy, Sam Ringo, were among the latter. All of that may be found in the Laguna County annals.

One thing that never found its way into the Laguna County records is the account of the two grizzled old pioneers' meeting that night, after the fight was over, in the office of the PH ranch, while the men of the two spreads drank from the same whiskey keg as they dressed each other's wounds.

"There's still a little matter of seven thousand dollars, plus twenty years' interest," grumbled Bert Runyan, pulling out his check book.

Paul Harris, who had the bottle, finished pouring two drinks. He caught Bert's hand as it reached for a pen. "I flew off the handle that time, I guess. For twenty years I've been prayin' for the chance to say that. I'm apologizin', Bert. Money couldn't pay for the way I feel right now."

And suddenly two stiff-backed, hard-shelled old-timers knew the inadequacy of words. They touched their glasses, and drank—an unspoken toast to a future that would pay for the past.

A GRIPPING NOVEL OF ADVENTURE IN PIONEER MONTANA

GUN-HIRE

Henry Stacy let the limp form of the girl slide from his arms.

By Walt Coburn

(Author of "Ghost Boss of the Mutiny Trail Crew," etc.)

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Lew Dahl struck a match and lit the swinging lamp behind the bar. Lee Murray rolled the poker dice from a battered leather cup and grinned at five deuces. Henry Stacy and Joe Tabor, of the Ladder 7 outfit, nodded approval.

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From outside, in the shadow by the open window, sounded a dry, rasping cough. It was hardly louder than a whisper—the nervous cough of a man with bad lungs. Faint as the sound was, Lee Murray and the two Ladder 7 men heard it. Stacy and Tabor stepped away from Lee Murray as he whirled, dice box in one hand, six-shooter in the other.

From those shadows outside, came a spurt of gun flame, the roar of a .45. A heavy lead slug tore through Lee Murray's chest, the force of it staggering the bronc rider backwards against the bar. Lee Murray's knees buckled and he slid to the floor in a lifeless heap, blood staining his dust-powdered, faded blue flannel shirt. Stacy and Tabor, motionless, with hands on their guns, stared at the dark opening of the window.

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"Stand your hands, men!" rasped a voice from out in the gathering night. "I don't want either of you, but I'll kill you both if you act jumpy. Go on with your drinkin'. Don't try to foller me, because it won't be healthy business. The drinks are on the ZT outfit. Bellies to the bar and don't turn around."

Lew Dahl, the whiskey peddler, was a big man with a heavy paunch and red, mottled face. He calmly set out the bottle for the two Ladder 7 men. Slowly, reluctantly, they tore their gaze from the open window and obeyed the orders given by the killer.

"The directions says take 'er," said Lew Dahl in his whiskey-husked voice. "I'd foller orders, boys. He won't shoot yuh in the back. Relax your systems, gents. Bend your gun arms to h'ist good likker."

As they lifted their drinks, they heard the pound of shod hoofs recede into the night.

THE two Ladder 7 men bent over the ZT bronc rider.

"Tore his heart plumb to hell," muttered Henry Stacy, his lean-jawed face a shade white under its tan and dust and three days' growth of sandy whiskers.

"Lee Murray's dead," agreed Joe Tabor, a short, stocky man with graying black hair and puckered gray eyes. "No doubt about it. We'll git the blame for this at the ZT camp."

"Not if you keep your traps shut," said the whiskey peddler, his pale gray eyes bleak. "Nobody seen you ride here but Lee Murray, and he won't be talkin' to nobody no more."

Henry Stacy was young, somewhere in his twenties. He was tall and lean, hard-fibered as seasoned rawhide. His eyes, clear blue, puckered from the sun, looked across the liquor-stained plank bar at the gray-haired whiskey peddler, who was eyeing him.

"Meanin' just what, mister? I'm a green hand in this part of Montana. Willin' to learn."

"The best way to git along in any country, Montana or Texas or the range between," said Lew Dahl, "is to keep a close mouth. Nobody's goin' to learn from me that two Ladder 7 line riders stopped here for a drink. You ain't been here. Have you, Tabor?"

Joe Tabor poured himself another stiff drink and gulped it down. He looked from under his slanted hatbrim at his younger partner.

"Lew's plumb right, Henry. Less said the better. We better hightail it before somebody comes along. Lew will handle this. He's used to this kind of stuff. Let's get to hell and gone away from here, feller."

"That was murder," said Henry Stacy, looking from Joe Tabor to the whiskey peddler. And the words had no sooner left his mouth than he knew he'd made a mistake, a bad mistake.

Joe Tabor and Lew Dahl were staring hard at him. He knew that the whiskey peddler's right hand, shoved under the bar, held a gun.

"I'd go light on that word," said Joe Tabor, his voice uneasy as he shot a meaning look at the big man behind the bar. "It ain't our affair, one way or another, Henry. Somebody out yonder shot Lee Murray. Murray had his gun in his hand when he dropped. The feller outside beat him to it. Lew is willin' to help you and me out by forgettin' he seen us here, savin' us a heap of trouble. There's no love lost between the ZT outfit and the Ladder 7. You know that.

"We slipped over here to Lew's to git a nip. Lee Murray, the ZT bronc fighter, is already here, lappin' up booze as fast as Lew kin set out the bottle. Somebody that has it in for Murray finds him here and kills him. Don't buy chips in a strange game, young feller. Savvy?"

Henry Stacy nodded slowly. He was, indeed, a stranger in a strange land. When he'd hired out to the Ladder *7* about a month ago, he'd been sent to a line camp on Antelope Creek with a note to Joe Tabor, who was camped there. He'd read the penciled note, written by Blake Lawton, owner of the Ladder *7*, on a leaf torn from a brand tally book.

"Tabor," the note had read. "Henry Stacy, bearer of this note, will take Ed Bush's place. Stacy's a stranger. Show him the ropes."

The day he reached the line camp, Henry Stacy had noticed a fresh grave marked by a mound of rocks on a knoll behind the barn. He'd asked Joe Tabor concerning it.

"Ed Bush is buried there," the grizzled, stocky, hard-eyed Tabor had said bluntly. "Somebody shot Ed on his way back to camp from the Whiskey Camp. Never found out who done the killin'. You're takin' Ed's place. Our job is to keep all Ladder *7* stuff throwed back, and brand up ary mavericks we run onto. It's pickin's if a man ain't scared of his shadder. Did Blake think to tell you you was drawin' fightin' pay?"

"Fightin' pay?" Hency Stacy had echoed blankly. "No, he didn't tell me. Fightin' pay? What for?"

"For upholdin' the rights of the Ladder *7* ag'in' the ZT outfit. Antelope Crick's a deadline between the two ranges."

DURING the five weeks Henry Stacy had been riding line with Joe Tabor, there had been no trouble. They'd handled the routine, monotonous work of drifting Ladder *7* cattle back from the creek where they came to water, branding what slick-eared stuff they found. And when Tabor said not to bother throwing back any ZT cows with unbranded calves that strayed onto Ladder *7* range, Henry Stacy was enough of a cowhand to know that it was all part of the business. If the calves grew big and were weaned in the late fall and put into the Ladder *7* iron, that was the ZT's hard luck. Hell, Henry Stacy was a cowpuncher, not a stock detective! He'd swung the hungry loop down in Texas more than once. He fashioned a running iron out of a wagon rod and ran the Ladder *7* on three or four big unbranded mavericks—pickin's, as Joe Tabor said.

With no boss riding close herd on them, Henry Stacy and Tabor had made their own working hours. On two occasions they'd met ZT line riders, stopped and augered in an almost friendly, though wary manner.

This afternoon Joe Tabor had led the way down into the edge of the Missouri River brakes to Lew Dahl's place, generally known as the Whiskey Camp. They'd found the ZT bronc rider there, half drunk already.

"Henry," Joe Tabor had said, "meet Lee Murray. Lee rides rough string for the ZT. Worked for a good outfit last spring, till him and Blake Lawton got into a argument and Lee bunched 'er. Lee's the best bronc peeler in Montana, drunk or sober. But don't loan him no money ner tell him the name and address of your best gal. He's a top-hand at bronc twistin'. But when you say it, you've tallied all his good points."

"I beat Tabor's time with a dancehall gal at Chinook two years ago this comin' Fourth," grinned the big bronc rider, "and Joe ain't been the same towards me since. How's the loopin' these days, boys? Fillin' 'em with ZT calves? They tell me Ed Bush had a runnin' iron in the fire and the fire was built on the wrong side of Antelope Crick, when he died of lead poison. Me, I'll stick to gentlin' green broncs at ten bucks per, and leave the deadline arguments to you boys that draws fightin' pay. Not that I'm bothered with a preacher's morals, but neither Blake Lawton of the Ladder *7* or Zeke

Tyler of the ZT pays enough to bother with it. Though you kin pack the word back to Blake that if ever he cuts for my sign, he better have a gun in his hand. And if ever I ketch him near Schoolhouse Coulee, I'll kill 'im."

"I don't pack no man's messages, Lee," Joe Tabor had said.

"And right you are," grinned the big bronc rider. "Let's have them poker dice, Lew. I'm rattlin' these Ladder 7 long-rope men for the drinks."

Henry Stacy had liked the big, loud-mouthed, swaggering bronc buster. He'd shaken five deuces when Lew Dahl had lighted the lamp—when that dry, hacking, whispering cough outside the open window had brought Lee Murray around, his gun in his hand. And a shot from the darkness out there had killed the big ZT bronc twister before he could thumb back the hammer of his gun.

Murder. . . . There was no other name for that quick killing. But in that short second before the shot had come, Lee Murray had known the identity of the man crouched outside the window in the dark. That nervous little hacking cough had told the ZT man the bushwhacker's identity. And looking now at Lew Dahl and Joe Tabor, Henry Stacy knew that they, too, knew the owner of that lunger's cough.

Henry Stacy sensed things quickly. This ride to the Whiskey Camp had been no casual trip for a drink or a jug to take back to camp. Joe Tabor had fetched him here as part of his education as a Ladder 7 line rider. Joe may even have known that Lee Murray had ridden to the Whiskey Camp some time around noon. There was a lot behind the hard, suspicious scrutiny of Lew Dahl right now. And Henry Stacy had sense enough to know that he'd better be careful of his choice of words. Lew Dahl's bloodshot pale eyes were those of a cold-blooded killer.

"You're a green hand," the whiskey peddler told him. "Better git Joe, here, or Blake Lawton to wise you up some. Here's a bottle to take along, mister. Come back when you got more savvy in your skull. So-long, Joe. Ride careful."

CHAPTER TWO

Boss of Wanted Men

THERE was a moon, and the patches of brush along the trail threw thick black shadows that could easily conceal a man with a gun. The ride back to the line camp at Antelope Springs, a distance of about seventeen miles, was a long and uneasy journey for Henry Stacy. Where the trail was wide enough, the two men rode side by side. When it narrowed, Joe Tabor took the lead. Following Tabor's example, Henry Stacy rode with his hand on his six-shooter every mile of the way.

To Henry Stacy's surprise, Blake Lawton was waiting at the line camp. He called to them from the dark interior of the log stable.

"Evenin', Joe. H'are you, Stacy?"

He stepped out of the shadow of the barn and into the moonlight. A tall, well proportioned man near thirty, he was lean-jawed, hawk-beaked, handsome in a hard, forceful way. His crisp black hair showed tufts of gray at the temples.

"Howdy, Blake," nodded Joe Tabor grimly. After the manner of the cow country, Blake Lawton's men mostly called him by his given name. Only dude cowmen expected their cowpunchers to 'mister' them. And Blake Lawton was no pilgrim dude.

His origin and past were hidden behind a sort of mysterious curtain. He'd come to Montana ten years ago with a well filled money belt, had bought land and cattle and horses, registered the Ladder 7 with the Livestock Association. He had killed three men who apparently had trailed him here; shot them down in a

swift, wordless gun fight on the main street of Chinook. It was the fastest, neatest, deadliest bit of gun fighting that tough little cowtown had ever witnessed. No man had ever screwed up the temerity to question the handsome, black-haired cowman as to the why and wherefor of that fight. No man had interfered when Blake Lawton went through the pockets of the dead men, taking what he found there. The identity of the three dead strangers had never come to light.

Blake Lawton had pushed his boundaries as far as Antelope Creek, where Zeke Tyler of the ZT had established a deadline. Zeke Tyler, big-boned, homely, had come up the trail from Texas with his cattle, had located on the Missouri River at the mouth of Rattlesnake Creek, claiming all the land within a day's long circle. Calling Antelope Creek his north line, he had warned other outfits, the Ladder *7* and Blake Lawton in particular, to cross Antelope Creek at their own risk.

So far as any man knew, Zeke Tyler and Blake Lawton had never met face to face in the ten years they'd been in Montana. And it was common rumor that if ever the two men did meet, they'd shoot it out. Range gossip claimed that they were old enemies from out of Texas somewhere.

Neither outfit would send out reps to work on the calf or beef roundups with the other wagon. There existed no working agreement to gather the beef or brand the calves in the other's iron. Stray steers wearing the ZT iron, if found on the Ladder *7* range, were likely to be butchered for beef; ZT cows had calves, and when the calves were old enough to wean, were promptly branded in the Ladder *7* iron—and vice-versa.

No drift fence marked the boundary along Antelope Creek. Both outfits used line riders. The men hired for line-riding duty got fighting pay and often earned it. The luckless filled graves such as Ed Bush occupied at the Antelope Springs line camp. The Whiskey Camp was on a sort of neutral strip of no man's land in the brakes of the Missouri River.

"What's new, Joe?" Blake Lawton asked flatly, and Henry Stacy somehow knew that the owner of the Ladder *7* outfit already had learned of Lee Murray's killing.

"Nary a thing," said Joe, dismounting and beginning to unsaddle. "Just the same old seven and six. Have a drink?"

"Lew Dahl's moonshine?"

"Yeah. It ain't no ten-year-old stuff. But Lew's been drinkin' it for years, and it ain't killed him yet."

"I don't need a drink that bad, Joe. What do you think of the Whiskey Camp, Stacy?"

Henry Stacy returned Blake Lawton's faintly smiling, cold-eyed scrutiny with an easy grin.

"It's all right if your stomach's strong enough to stand it. Me, I don't like the

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"Weak stomach, eh, Stacy?" Blake Lawton's voice was an edge sharp, his thin-lipped mouth grinning faintly. "No guts, you mean?"

"Call it that if it'll make you feel better, mister," said the young cowpuncher. "I'm not makin' fight talk. I'm just quittin'—drawin' my time."

"That so? I wouldn't be hasty, if I were you. Think it over. I had a notion you'd make a good hand along the Antelope line. You have the earmarks of a fast cowhand. And you don't look like a damned yellow-bellied coward that quits at his first sniff of gunsmoke."

"I don't like murder." Henry Stacy's hand was on his gun. His voice was brittle.

BLAKE LAWTON laughed. There was no mirth in the sound, and his eyes were cold, glittering slits.

"They called it murder at Laramie, didn't they, Stacy, when the law sentenced you to hang last April?" Blake Lawton's tone was cold.

Without taking his eyes from Henry Stacy's, he spoke to Joe Tabor. "Kill him, Joe, if he tries to pull his gun. Break his damned spine. Stacy, better behave or you'll be joinin' Lee Murray."

"It'll be murder," said Henry Stacy flatly.

"I don't give a damn what name you call it," said Blake Lawton. "The result is what counts. You wouldn't be missed around here if you didn't ever show up again. Only the coyotes are much interested in new graves on the Ladder *7* range. Or I might let Joe make a little side money by collectin' the thousand dollars bounty on your hide. That's what they'll pay at Laramie, Wyoming, for your carcass. Ex-convicts like you should travel farther and faster than you've gone, Stacy, since you escaped from the deputy who was takin' you to the pen to lock you up till the scheduled date of your legal hangin'.

"You shouldn't have pulled up till you crossed the Canadian line. But you did pull up, Stacy. You hired out to me because you'd heard that the law never rides the Ladder *7* range—or the ZT range, either. Zeke Tyler and Blake Lawton are their own law in this strip of the Montana cow country. You're plumb safe from the arm of John Law when you hire out to the Ladder *7*. But I expect you to make a hand when you draw top wages, Stacy. And if you think you're coyotin' on me at the first sniff of powdersmoke, you're loco as a sheepherder. . . . Well?"

Henry Stacy's hand came slowly away from his gun. "You win, mister," he said, and got down off his horse and started unsaddling.

"You'll take my orders, Stacy," said the Ladder *7* owner. "And you'll carry 'em out to the limit. Is that understood?"

Henry Stacy nodded. "I savvy."

Blake Lawton and Joe Tabor went on to the cabin while Henry Stacy did his barn chores.

Left alone, the young cowpuncher had a chance to think things over, weigh his chances. He wondered how Blake Lawton had learned of that ugly business at Laramie. And he cussed himself for not having changed his name. But he'd felt safe, once he'd crossed the Wyoming line into Montana. A man he'd met in the Hole in the Wall country on the outlaw trail had told him to hire out to the Ladder *7* and he'd be safe. This range was a hide-out for hunted men. He didn't mind doing a little rustling to pay for the protection offered by the Ladder *7* iron. But to be mixed up in what promised to be a bloody range feud was not to his liking. He'd had one hard-learned lesson back in Wyoming. He wanted no part of this Montana war between the Ladder *7* and ZT outfits.

Yonder on the knoll was the mound of

boulders that marked the grave of a cowboy named Ed Bush, who had held this line rider job till ZT bullets had cut him down. That was the ultimate end of a fighting man on the Ladder 7 payroll. Not a pleasant prospect for a young cowhand who loved life.

"First chance I git," he told himself, "I'll hit the trail for Canada—or back to Texas, where I belong. Meanwhile, I hired out for a tough hand and I'll play my string out."

As he walked from the barn to the cabin, the mound of rocks on the knoll showed plainly against the moonlit sky. A monument of death!

The shades of the lighted cabin were pulled tight. The door was barred on the inside. He rapped on the heavy door.

"That you, Stacy?" called Joe Tabor's voice.

"It's me," Henry replied.

There was the rasping sound of the bar sliding free. The door opened. And Blake Lawton, who had opened it, stood behind the heavy plank door as it swung inward.

The lamp was turned low, so that Tabor was back in the shadow. They were taking no chances. Henry Stacy grinned, and came in with his hands up.

"Not that we're mistrustful, Henry," said Joe Tabor, when the Ladder 7 owner closed the door and barred it. "Just cautious. Turn up the lamp and have a drink. Take a good un. You'll need it to keep awake. Blake's sendin' you to the ZT ranch on the Missouri River—as sort of a rep for the Ladder 7."

CHAPTER THREE

Bargain for a Murder Hireling

"YOU'LL saddle your private horse," Blake Lawton told Henry Stacy. "Load your bed on your pack horse. You'll tell Zeke Tyler that you got into a argument with Joe, here, and quit. The reason for the argument was just what you told me a little while ago at the barn. The killin' of that loud-mouthed bronc stomper, Lee Murray, at the Whiskey Camp, gave you a bad case of gut-ache. You'll hire out to Zeke Tyler. Understand?" There was an unpleasant smile on the Ladder 7 owner's thin-lipped mouth.

"I reckon I savvy the job. You're sendin' me over on the ZT range to act as a spy."

"You're a good guesser, Stacy. I'm pickin' you, because you have more brains than the average common cowhand. I know a little of your record. Because I need a man like you, I took the trouble to look along your back trail. You're made to order for this rep job. Your pay is double what you've been drawin'." Lawton was watching Henry Stacy closely as he talked.

He went on, his voice harsh: "Do a good job of it and you'll be taken care of right. Double-cross me and you'll live long enough to wish you'd never been born. And I'll know if you double-cross me in any way. You'll be told when to meet me again, and where. I'll get word to you. You'll be watched. And now, Stacy, just to give your story the proper color, to convince Zeke Tyler that you and Joe Tabor actually tangled hard, Joe is goin' to mark you up some—just a friendly little bout and no hard feelin's on Joe's part, understand. If you can hang a shiner on Joe while he's beatin' you up, all the better. . . . Take to him, Joe."

Henry Stacy looked from the thin-lipped, cold-eyed cowman to Joe Tabor. He was shocked a little at the change that had come over the man who for five weeks had been his line camp partner. The two men had not been real friends, to be sure. But they hadn't quarreled. Tabor was a quiet man, sober, doing his share of the work, giving Henry his

orders without any undue show of authority. But as Joe Tabor unbuckled his gun belt and laid his six-shooter on the table beside the bottle of Lew Dahl's moonshine whiskey, there was a wicked glint in the blocky man's eyes and his grin was ugly. There was hatred, cold, brutal, relentless, stamped on Joe Tabor's square-jawed, battered face.

"I'll send you to the ZT," he spat, taking a pull at the bottle and setting it on the table, "lookin' like you'd just lost an argument with a grizzly. Shed your gun and put up your dukes, mister. You're as yellow as a coyote's belly." Then Joe Tabor spat a fighting name in Henry Stacy's face. "Fight you————!"

Henry Stacy wondered if the two men planned to kill him here in the locked cabin. There was that thin-lipped smile on Blake Lawton's dark face. Tabor's eyes were bloodshot slits of fury. But he had no time to think things out. Tabor rushed like a thick-chested, heavy-shouldered, powerful bull, his head thrust forward at a fighting angle, hairy fists swinging.

The rush caught Henry as he was putting his gun on the table. The attack was without warning. Henry went down, stunned by a glancing blow on the side of his face. And as he reeled backwards, Tabor was on top of him, his heavy fists clubbing.

Henry Stacy twisted, cat-like, rolling free. As Tabor gained his feet, Henry came at him. He was lithe, swift, young. And he had more than a rudimentary knowledge of boxing, which he'd picked up from a second-rate prize fighter who had cooked for a cow outfit down in Texas, where Henry had worked two winters ago.

He dodged Tabor's heavy, clumsy fists, and went to work. In those minutes of fighting, Henry Stacy's blows landed with hard-muscled, well-timed accuracy. Tabor was rated the toughest man in the Ladder 7 outfit at rough-and-tumble fighting. Blank astonishment was followed by blind fury, then a creeping fear, as the young cowpuncher's hard fists crashed with sickening regularity into his face. Henry's shifting footwork carried him just out of reach of Tabor's heavy swings. He'd sidestep, shift, rip in lefts and rights that had the older man staggering drunkenly, completely at his mercy. Joe Tabor's face was a bloody pulp.

Out of the corner of his eye, Henry saw Blake Lawton's face, livid with anger. He saw the Ladder 7 owner's right hand on his gun. And it flashed through his mind that if he knocked Joe Tabor out, as he fully intended doing, Blake Lawton meant to kill him. . . .

HENRY STACY'S brain was working rapidly. He maneuvered Joe Tabor into the right position for the knockout blow. He let him have it. And before Tabor's bulk hit the dirt floor of the cabin, Henry dove at Blake Lawton's middle—for all the world, like a football player making a tackle.

The Ladder 7 ramrod's gun exploded with a roar that filled the small cabin with deafening thunder. As they went down, Henry sank his knee into the cowman's belly and groin with sickening force. Blake Lawton let out a gasping cry of pain. Henry grabbed the man's gun, wrenched it free, and clipped Blake Lawton across the head and jaw with the long barrel of the six-shooter. The Ladder 7 owner went limp as a sack.

Tying the two unconscious men hand and foot took only a couple of minutes. Blake Lawton groaned and opened his eyes.

"You aimed to kill me, Lawton," said Henry Stacy. "Why?"

"You took the game too damned seriously," gritted the man on the floor. "It looked like you were tryin' to kill Tabor. I told you it was just a game."

"And I think you lied. Tabor started in to beat the life out of me. You aimed to let him."

"Nonsense! Tabor cussed you to make you fight. We didn't know you could scrap like that. You killed Joe?"

"I don't know. And right now I'm not carin', one way or another. I'm leavin' you both hogtied. By hard work you'll git free in half an hour or so. By that time, I'm goin' to be a long ways on the other side of Antelope Crick. I'm hirin' out to the ZT. But I won't be reppin' for the Ladder 7 when I go on Zeke Tyler's payroll. I don't need your damned Ladder protection, mister. And if you dug up the right sign along my back trail, you'd know I was framed at Laramie on a murder charge. I saw that ZT bronc rider, Lee Murray, murdered at the Whiskey Camp. I'm tellin' Zeke Tyler what happened. Which reminds me of somethin' Lee Murray said just before he was murdered. He give Joe Tabor a message for you. He said for you to stay away from Schoolhouse Coulee."

Blake Lawton's thin lips writhed in a snarl. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. The glitter in his eyes, as he stared at Henry, was like that of a snake being teased.

"I'm ridin' past Schoolhouse Coulee," said Henry Stacy, "on my way to the ZT ranch—just to see what there is to see there."

"When you hire out to Zeke Tyler," Blake Lawton spat at him, "you're taking just another way of committing suicide. I'm tellin' you straight. You're a hot-headed fool, Stacy. Joe Tabor was drunk, and overplayed his hand. You gave him the worst beatin' he ever got in his life. Unless you want him gunning for you from now on, you'd better finish him before he comes out of it. Rap him on the head—unless he's already dead."

"Murder the man, Lawton?" Henry was a little aghast at the cowman's cold-blooded, open contempt for fair play.

"Murder is an ugly word, Stacy. I was offering you a little advice. Tabor's as much dead as he is alive. And if you let him live, he'll kill you some night, sure as hell."

"I'll risk it. If I'd killed him in a fair fight, that would be just part of the game. Murder is somethin' else entirely. I don't want any part of it."

Blake Lawton smiled. "Good. Stacy, you can take this or leave it. I admire your grit and your principles. I know all about that frame-up down in Wyoming. You worked for the wrong outfit in a cattle war, and they framed you. I can clear you of that murder charge at Laramie. And if you'll string your bets with me, I can sit you on top of the world. I need a man I can trust, a man that won't shoot me in the back. Name your own wages and you're hired. And no hard feelings about this little mistake you just made when you hogtied me."

"I wouldn't work for you if you was the last man on earth to offer me a job. I don't hire out to a murderer."

"You'd better cut that word murder out of your vocabulary, Stacy. Your only bet is to work for me. Hire out to Zeke Tyler, and you're signing your own death warrant. That's no threat. It's horse sense truth. You'll learn that I'm right. But it will be too late then to change your mind. You're burning your bridges behind you. You have nerve, Stacy, and a blunt sort of honesty. But you lack a shrewd brain to back up those two qualities. And without a clever brain, your courage and innate honesty won't get much of a chance. I'm not bluffing. I'm giving you your one chance of survival. Will you untie me and hire out to me?"

"I'll see you in hell first, Lawton. I won't hire out to a murderer at any wages."

"And you're going on the ZT payroll, Stacy?"

"I'm goin' to the ZT ranch and tell Tyler how Lee Murray was murdered in cold blood at the Whiskey Camp. Chances are I'll hire out to Zeke Tyler."

Blake Lawton laughed shortly. "You're a comical clown, Stacy. Now get to hell off the Ladder *7* range! Your number's up. From now on you're living on stolen time. Clear out!"

HENRY STACY saddled his private horse. He had to get his bed from the cabin, working under the slitted, ugly stare of Blake Lawton. He lashed his tarp-covered blankets on his pack horse with a squaw-hitch, then went back inside the cabin to blow out the lamp.

Joe Tabor lay on the floor, tied hand and foot. He hadn't moved much. It was with a start of surprise that Henry saw that the man's blackened, swollen eyes were not shut. He wondered how long the man had been conscious. Henry got a basin of water and washed the blood from Tabor's battered face. Joe Tabor didn't speak. He shut his eyes while Henry bathed his bloody face. Henry held the bottle to the man's bruised mouth, and Joe Tabor drank the raw whiskey down in big gulps.

"You asked for what I give you, Joe. I shore didn't want to beat you up thisaway."

Joe Tabor didn't reply. Save that he opened his swollen, blackened eyes to thin, bloodshot slits, and that he swallowed about a pint of whiskey as a thirsty man gulps water, Joe Tabor acted unconscious.

"I'll tell Tabor of your kind first aid ministrations, Stacy, when he wakes up—unless I happen to forget."

Joe Tabor's back was towards Blake Lawton, and the latter hadn't seen that Tabor's eyes had opened.

Henry Stacy had turned the lamp wick low and had bent to blow out the light as Blake Lawton spoke. He was about to say something in reply, when he happened to glance down at Joe Tabor's face. Tabor's head shook in a negative motion. His slitted eyes widened, one of them shutting in a fully conscious, meaningful wink.

Henry grinned at the trussed-up cowman.

"Most likely, Lawton," he said, "you'll tell Joe Tabor that I spit in his face. That's your snake-way."

He blew out the lamp and went out. He swung into his saddle. With his bed-laden pack horse following, Henry Stacy rode into the night.

As he came around a patch of brush at the rear of the cabin, he thought he heard a sound in the dense, black shadows. It made him jerk his gun and duck low along the neck of his horse. That sound was a dry, nervous cough—the cough he'd heard outside the window at the Whiskey Camp just before Lee Murray had been murdered.

He was gripped by a momentary fear that sent a prickling shiver along his spine. He raked his horse with the spurs, expecting a shot in the back. But no gun blast broke the night's silence. He slowed to a trot. There was the temptation to turn back and investigate. Then his saner judgment came to his rescue, and sent him along the trail.

The killer with the whispering cough had killed a ZT rider. Therefore he was a Ladder *7* man. By now, he had undoubtedly freed both Joe Tabor and Blake Lawton. They'd kill Henry Stacy if he rode back there. They'd shoot him from shadowed ambush.

The thought that they might be following him drove Henry Stacy to a faster pace. Traveling at a long trot, he put distance between himself and the line camp at Antelope Springs. And he headed for the ZT ranch on the Missouri River, by way of Schoolhouse Coulee, at the edge of the badlands.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mistress of Schoolhouse Coulee

THE wise thing to do, Henry Stacy told himself as he rode into the night, was to swing north toward the Canadian border. In Canada, with a new name, he could make a fresh start. He'd made one mistake, back in Wyoming. Love of high adventure had caused him to hire out to one of the big cow outfits that was mixed up in a bitter, blood-soaked range war. He'd been arrested, tried and convicted for a killing he had not been mixed up in. Now he was about to become involved in a similar war between Blake Lawton and Zeke Tyler. He had refused to work for Lawton because he'd seen a ZT man murdered in cold blood. He was taking the story of that murder to Zeke Tyler. He had never seen the owner of the ZT iron. And for all he knew, Zeke Tyler was no better than Blake Lawton.

Henry Stacy told himself that he'd reached the crossroads; that before he took the trail to the ZT ranch, he'd better do some thinking. He remembered the advice of the grizzled, gray-mustached deputy sheriff who had been assigned to take him from the jail to the State Penitentiary.

"Son," had said the big, soft-spoken peace officer, whose name was Bill Marvin, "I'm goin' to let you escape. I attended the trial, and I know that you was railroaded. Because you're a cowpuncher that worked for the Cross P outfit, they nabbed you and railroaded you for a killin' you never did. I was behind your arrest, son. I engineered it, with Cross P money. They tried and convicted you for the killin' of a nester named Bob Gilford. But Bob Gilford wasn't a real nester. He was an imported killer from Indian territory, who took up a homestead as a blind. As low-down a snake as ever shot a Cross P cowpuncher from the brush! He deserved what he got and worse. He wasn't murdered. He died fightin'. He had a fair chance. . . . I know, son. Because I killed the damned snake, for secret reasons that are connected with this range war.

"I kept plumb quiet durin' the trial, because I have to stay out of jail. I got more snakes like Bob Gilford to kill. I pulled strings till I managed for this job of deliverin' you to the pen. You're ridin' the best ridge-runner I could mount you on. Here's a roll of money that'll take you plumb to South America or anywhere you've a mind to go. It's Cross P money, and you've earned it—a good grubstake. Here's a belt full of cartridges and a six-shooter. I hope you never have occasion to use the gun.

"I'm lettin' you make a clean getaway. Take my advice, and ride hard till you reach a peaceful range. In due time, when the sign is right, I'll clear your name here in Wyoming. I'd clear you now, except that if I told the truth it would tip my hand."

Bill Marvin had a nickel-plated deputy's star pinned to his vest. He reached into an inside pocket of his coat and took out a small gold badge, which he showed to Henry Stacy. On the badge was the engraved lettering: "United States Marshal." Bill Marvin was also a Secret Service man.

"You're young," the law officer had told Henry. "You got sand. And as far as I know, you're honest. Hunt a new range. Make a clean start. Keep it clean. Good luck, Henry Stacy."

Henry hadn't made any promises to Bill Marvin. The grizzled Secret Service man had not asked him to make any kind of promise. He'd simply given some sound advice. And Henry wasn't taking it.

"I'll tell Zeke Tyler how his bronc rider got murdered at the Whiskey Camp," he decided. "Then I'll ride on.

Winter in Canada, mebby; then if I don't like it, I'll move on."

There were no home ties dragging him back to Texas, where he'd been born and raised. Orphaned when he was thirteen, he'd drifted from one cow outfit to another, working first at horse wrangling, then as a cowhand. He'd gone to school in the winter, working at odd jobs to pay for his board and room and a little spending money. In the money belt he wore beneath his undershirt was five thousand dollars, the Cross P money Bill Marvin had given him to get him out of Wyoming. He had a notion Bill Marvin had made the big cattle outfit come through with that generous sum. Bill Marvin, he told himself, was the finest, squarest man he'd ever met.

HENRY STACY headed for the ZT by the way of Schoolhouse Coulee. And he grinned to himself in the moonlight as he admitted the reason for that decision. There was a new schoolmarm at Schoolhouse Coulee, Joe Tabor had told him. And both Blake Lawton and Zeke Tyler were stuck on her.

"I never sighted her," Joe Tabor had said on the way to camp from Lew Dahl's Whiskey Camp, "but from what I hear tell, she's shore worth burnin' gunpowder over. Schoolhouse Coulee is ten miles from the Whiskey Camp, at the edge of Ladder 7 and ZT ranges. She teaches the kids from the nester ranches nearby. Lee Murray, they tell it, done taken up a desert claim and was aimin' to settle down if the schoolmarm would marry him. Today was the first time in months that Lee's gone on a drunk. The way I read the sign, the schoolmarm must have turned him down. And from that crack he made, Blake Lawton's been hornin' in on his school section. Poor Lee died afore he could join the Maverick Pool. That's what the ZT and Ladder 7 call the nester ranchers."

Henry Stacy would take the news of Lee Murray's death to the new schoolmarm at Schoolhouse Coulee. And he'd see for himself how capitvating her charms were. She lived alone there, he knew, preferring it to boarding with any of the neighboring ranchers. That fact alone marked her as being an unusually brave and independent sort of girl. Still, there was no accounting for some of the notions these tenderfoot girls from the East got into their heads when they came out West.

Henry Stacy wanted to meet her. He was no ladies' man, by any stretch of the imagination. But he was young, and he'd had his dreams of romance by many a lonely campfire. Perhaps it was the moonlight that made him a little lightheaded as he rode along now, humming to himself.

He stopped at a water hole and spent almost half an hour washing up. In giving Joe Tabor that whipping, Henry hadn't come off unscathed. Tabor had bloodied his nose, and one of his eyes felt swollen and sore and partly shut. He knew it was black.

He got a clean shirt from his warsack, and rode on feeling a lot cleaner and more presentable. He had tried to shave, cut himself several times because he had no mirror nor light to see by, then finally had given it up.

Sometime after midnight, riding along a wide ridge, he saw the yellow glow of a light about a mile below, in a long, wide coulee where cottonwoods and willows grew along the bank of Schoolhouse Creek.

Henry Stacy rode slowly down the long, easy slope of the ridge. And as he neared the schoolhouse, which was in reality a little ranch with shed and barn and corral and cabin beside the log schoolhouse, he wondered what was keeping the schoolmarm up until this late hour.

The light was suddenly blotted out. Henry knew now that it had come from an open doorway. Now someone had closed the door. Caution prompted him to pull up. He sat his horse, straining his ears to catch any sound. And he heard the sound of shod hoofs. Then he saw a man on horseback leave the place and ride off at a long trot in the direction of Lew Dahl's Whiskey Camp. The distance was too great to recognize the horse or rider.

Without knowing why, for no cause whatever, because he'd never laid eyes on the schoolmarm, Henry Stacy felt a pang of jealousy. And wondered just what sort of girl it was who chose living alone instead of with the family of one of the small ranchers. And entertained men visitors until near dawn. Joe Tabor had said Lee Murray had quit drinking on her account. That Blake Lawton and Zeke Tyler were both stuck on her. That she was worth killing a man over. Had Lee Murray been killed because of the schoolmarm?

"I'll tell her that the ZT bronc fighter was killed," he told himself grimly, "and see how she takes it. One man gets killed on her account—and he ain't even buried before she's kissin' another lover goodbye at two-three o'clock in the mornin'. . . . A dude schoolmarm with fancy notions, flirtin' and carryin' on with every cowpuncher that rides along."

With this unreasoning and jealous condemnation of a girl he'd never seen, Henry Stacy rode towards the little cluster of log buildings. A light showed behind the drawn blinds of a small cabin. The sound of his horse's hoofs must have reached inside the cabin. Because, as he rode up, the cabin door opened abruptly.

A GIRL stood in the lighted doorway, a small-calibered, silver-mounted pistol in her hand. And beside her was the biggest dog Henry had ever seen, a short-haired, blue-black dog that growled a deep-throated warning, the hackles along its neck and shoulders bristling.

The girl was small. She wore a short, divided skirt of leather, scarred by hard usage, glove-fitting, high-heeled boots and silver-mounted spurs. Her soft, gray flannel blouse gaped open at the throat, and a red silk neckscarf hung loosely around her slim, tanned throat. Thick, curly black hair showed under the slanted brim of a dust-powdered black Stetson. She had a small nose and a firm little chin. A pair of smoke-gray eyes, black-fringed under clearly defined black brows, studied Henry Stacy, who was revealed plainly in the shaft of yellow light that came from the open doorway. Her smile was faint, uncertain, without warmth.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice soft, drawling, unafraid. And Henry knew by her manner, her clothes, her voice, that she was no dude girl from the East. Girls in Texas had that drawl in their voice. "Who are you and what brings you here at this unearthly hour of the morning?"

This tanned, healthy looking, frank mannered girl and her direct, open questioning had him tongue-tied. Her face looked a little white, so that the freckles on her nose showed plainly.

There was a slight motion of the gun in her hand. The big black dog growled. There was cold suspicion in the girl's voice when she spoke again, her voice sharp with impatience.

"Can't you talk? Who are you? You followed us here, waited until I was alone, then rode up. I don't like your looks. Quit staring at me like that and answer my questions!"

"No need," said Henry Stacy, grinning faintly at the girl's uneasiness, frankly admiring her good looks, "to git in a lather about it. I don't fight girls. I'm on my way to the ZT ranch. I just quit the Ladder 7."

"And you rode ten miles out of your way in the middle of the night to tell me, a stranger, that you'd quit your job. That don't make sense to me. You trailed us here. You waited till I was alone—"

"You said that once, lady. I didn't trail you here. And I don't like bein' called a liar, even by the best-lookin' girl I ever laid eyes on. If your conscience bothers you, that's somethin' I can't do much about. I rode that ten miles outa my way because I wanted a look at the schoolmarm who lived here at Schoolhouse Coulee—and to fetch her news of Lee Murray's bein' shot at Whiskey Camp. Joe Tabor said you was worth burnin' gunpowder over, so I was naturally curious. I just—"

"Stop it!" The girl's face was chalk-white now, her gray eyes dark with pain. "You've no right to accuse me of Lee's death. Who sent you here? Blake Lawton or Zeke Tyler? Which one of them hires you to annoy lone women at night? You were afraid to show up here until you were certain I was alone. You cold-trailed us here, waited until—"

"You're repeatin' yourself again, ma'am," said Henry, his face hot under her accusation, angry clear through at the contempt that now replaced the flicker of fear that had shown in her eyes.

"Stay on your horse," she said flatly, and the silver-mounted gun was steady in her hand. Her left hand was on the big dog's head.

"Try to step off," she cautioned him, "and Black Ace will tear you apart. I suppose you're drunk. Anyhow, you've been in a fight of some kind. Your face is battered up and your clothes are bloody as a butcher's. I've seen you somewhere before, and under circumstances that weren't pleasant. I'd probably recognize you if you were shaved and cleaned up and didn't have a black eye."

"Don't expect to find me on your list of moonstruck cowboys," Henry Stacy flared, "even if there is so many you can't recall what they look like. Lee Murray ain't buried yet, and you go on a moonlight ride—"

"If I were a man," the girl cut in, her voice brittle with anger and contempt, "I'd finish the job of beating you up, where the last man left off. You'd better ride on."

With a quick, unconscious gesture, she had pulled off her dust-powdered black Stetson and tossed it behind her. So that now her white, strained face was revealed against an unruly tangle of heavy black curly hair.

Henry Stacy gave an almost audible gasp of surprise. He'd seen that girl before. Six months or more ago, at Laramie, where he was being tried and sentenced to hang for murder, that girl had sat at the rear of the crowded courtroom, day after day, with that same tense, white look on her face.

THE past months of living like a hunted animal, with a bounty offered for his scalp, had forced Henry Stacy into the habit of avoiding close scrutiny and running away from anyone who might recognize him. He followed that impulse now. Reining his horse, he rode away. When he had gone a hundred yards or so, he looked back over his shoulder. The girl was still standing there in the lighted doorway, the big black hound at her side, the silver-mounted gun glittering in her hand.

He rode at a trot for perhaps half an hour, his brain all confused with a tangle of emotions. He was angry at the girl, but even more so at himself for losing his temper and accusing her of some mighty ugly things. He told himself that if she'd taken a shot at him, or set her black hound on him, she'd have been justified. Henry cussed himself for all the hard names he could think of.

Hell, that was the girl who'd come

every day to his trial. She'd sat off by herself in the rear of the packed courtroom, enduring air that was foul with the odors of sweating men whose clothes smelled of barns and horses, the dull monotony of the trial, the tilts between the lawyers. And all during that trial, with every man in the courtroom armed except the prisoner, with a six-shooter on the judge's desk, it would have taken but a tiny spark to touch off that charged, tense crowd of men who represented both factions of a blood-spattered range war. Save for a few hard-faced women from the honkeytonks, there out of idle curiosity or with tipsy escorts, no other decent women had attended the trial. . . . This girl with the black hair and tense, white face, who had sat listening to every bit of the trial, making notes sometimes, this girl who had been so out of place in that sordid, dangerous spot, had remained pictured in Henry Stacy's memory.

When he'd been ordered to stand up to receive the verdict, he'd met her eyes across the packed courtroom. He'd seen her smile at him. And he had seen her recoil as if struck across the face when the judge pronounced the death sentence.

"To be hanged by the neck until dead! And may God have mercy on your soul!" the judge had intoned. And as the judge rapped for order with the long barrel of his six-shooter, and Bill Marvin and a dozen other peace officers had hurried their convicted prisoner out the rear door, Henry had caught a brief glimpse of the girl being escorted through the crowd by a couple of special deputies.

That girl was the schoolmarm who now lived alone at Schoolhouse Coulee, with a big black hound and a silver-mounted gun for protection. Henry pulled up. He had a notion to ride back there, to tell her where she'd seen him before. He wanted to ask her what queer business it was that had brought her, as out of place as a prairie flower in a mess of loco and stink weed, into that Laramie courtroom where a Cross P cowpuncher was on trial for the murder of a nester named Bob Gilford. He'd wondered at the time if she was some kin to the dead man, because her interest in the trial had been far deeper than just morbid curiosity. But he hadn't asked a single question concerning her. And he'd gotten the impression that she was silently hoping and praying that the judge and jury would clear him.

Now he wanted to go back and talk to the girl. He was about to turn back when four riders appeared. They rode up out

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of a long draw, sighted him about the time he saw them. There was no running away now, no turning back. He rode boldly on to meet them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Brand-Blotter's Paradise

THE tall man on the gray horse, riding a little in the lead, was Zeke Tyler. Henry Stacy recognized him from the sketchy descriptions he'd had of the man —tall, raw-boned, lantern-jawed, with tow-colored hair and gray-green eyes that were pale against the deep weather-tanned color of his skin. His cheek bones were high and his cheeks hollow looking, gaunt, shadowed in the moonlight. There was a brutal look about the set of his jaw and the grin on his wide, heavy-lipped mouth, a craftiness in his pale sage green eyes.

Instantly Henry Stacy mistrusted the owner of the ZT iron as much as he'd disliked Blake Lawton. Zeke Tyler had an unclean look. His flannel shirt, faded blue, was streaked with white sweat marks and badly soiled, as if he had lived in it night and day for weeks. In a room he would reek of stale sweat and tobacco juice and rot-gut whiskey. He was half drunk now.

"Travelin', stranger?" Zeke Tyler swung his horse to block the main trail. "Or just driftin' with the breeze? You're on my range, and I don't like strangers. Speak your piece, and make 'er all truth and a yard wide. You're lookin' at Zeke Tyler." His voice was flat-toned, ugly.

"He's the feller that's been ridin' line with Joe Tabor, Zeke," said one of the ZT men Henry remembered having met before.

"When it comes your turn," Zeke Tyler snapped at the man, without taking his green eyes from Henry's face, "bet your lousy little white chips. Till you're called on, keep your damned mouth shut. Sing your song, stranger. What in hell you doin' on my range?"

"I'm gettin' off it," said Henry Stacy bluntly, angered by the cowman's tone, "as fast as my horse will pack me. I did have it in mind to tell you how I'd seen a ZT man killed. Sort of give you a friendly tip. But I've about changed my mind."

"You was aimin' to double-cross Blake Lawton?"

"I told Blake Lawton that I was hirin' out to the ZT outfit, and that I was goin' to tell Zeke Tyler that Lee Murray got murdered at Lew Dahl's Whiskey Camp."

"The hell you say! They claim that if you split a magpie's tongue, he'll shore talk. You remind me of that kind of a bird, the way you run off at the head. I ain't hirin' squealers of any kind, or at any price. If you figger on sellin' me ary secrets, just mark the profits off your dirty tally book. I ain't in the market fer news. If you'd sell Blake Lawton out to me, you'd turn around and sell me out to Lawton—or to the Maverick Pool nesters. Your breed of snake don't last long on this range. Somebody is likely to tromp your belly off.

"Only that you've ketched me in a good humor, I'd gut-shoot you right now. But I'm good natured and soft hearted tonight. I'm just runnin' you off the ZT range and lettin' you go. The next time I cut your sign, I'll have the boys string you up to one of the schoolmarm's cottonwoods.

"See that timbered ridge yonder? That marks the boundary line between the ZT range and the nester pack on yonder side of it. Head that direction, and whip that cayuse of yourn down the hind laig. Go tell your fairy stories to the nesters of the Maverick Pool. They're a long-eared pack that'll listen. Me and Blake Lawton do our fightin' in our own way, without

the help of such things as you. Lucky fer you I'm feelin' chicken-hearted tonight, Stacy. Drag it! Git off the ZT range!"

Zeke Tyler had a six-shooter in his hand. The other three had their hands on their guns.

There was nothing for Henry Stacy to do but ride away. Half-expecting to be shot in the back, he reined his horse and started off at a running walk. Zeke Tyler and his three men sat their horses, watching him.

He'd traveled perhaps fifty feet when his ears caught a sound that jerked him around in his saddle, his gun in his hand, every nerve taut. He'd heard a dry, whispering cough. It was the same dry-throated cough he'd heard twice before—once at the Whiskey Camp when Lee Murray was murdered, the second time at the Antelope Springs line camp.

One of the four ZT riders had coughed. But there was no way of telling which man it was. Zeke Tyler was lifting a bottle to his mouth. The other three sat their motionless horses, their hands on their guns.

"Keep ridin'," called Zeke Tyler flatly, "or your good luck will git changed. Keep ridin', Stacy!"

HENRY STACY rode on, his back stiff, as if braced to catch the impact of a bullet that would break his spine. One of those four ZT riders was the man who had killed Lee Murray. The bronc rider's murderer worked for the ZT.

Not until he was beyond gun range and out of sight of the four, did Henry Stacy draw a full breath. Then he let his horse hit a long lope, and with his laden packhorse following behind, he headed for the timbered ridge and the nester country beyond.

And as he rode he recalled a peculiar thing. Zeke Tyler had called him by name. Zeke Tyler had called him Stacy!

That meant that the owner of the ZT outfit knew more about him than he had let on when he had addressed him as 'stranger'. Just how much of his history Zeke Tyler knew, Henry Stacy could only guess. Blake Lawton knew about the Laramie trial. Had Lawton gotten his information from the little black-haired schoolmarm? Probably. If Lawton had mentioned the name Henry Stacy to her, she might easily have told him about the trial. And if the Wyoming nester, Bob Gilford, for whose murder Henry had been sentenced to hang, was kinfolks to the girl, she'd have plenty of reason for wishing Henry harm. She might have told Zeke Tyler as well as Blake Lawton that Henry Stacy was wanted for hanging in Wyoming.

"I'm into this now," Henry Stacy told himself as he headed for the nester strip. "No man kin talk to me like that lantern-jawed, snake-eyed son did, and make me take it."

He had ridden perhaps five miles when he came up on a bunch of cattle that showed signs of having been handled recently and turned loose. Thirty head of cattle had been driven into a long coulee and turned loose there, where the feed was good and the water plentiful. The moonlight showed the brands on most of the stuff. Some of the cows with big calves had been recently branded. On the left ribs of half a dozen cows was burned a fresh Ladder 7. The calves were in the same iron. That struck Henry Stacy's cowpuncher mind as being almighty odd. This was ZT range. Zeke Tyler wasn't branding cattle to make money for Blake Lawton.

There was something altogether wrong about the fresh brands on those cows. It called for a little inspection. Henry Stacy unbuckled his rope strap. Building a loop, he singled out one of the freshly branded cows in the Ladder 7 iron.

The Ladder 7 brand was a two-rung

Ladder with the figure *7* forming the left side of the Ladder. Since brands are read from left to right, the proper reading of this one would be *7* Ladder instead of Ladder *7*. But someone had miscalled the brand somewhere, sometime, and the brand had become known generally as the Ladder *7*.

Henry Stacy roped and threw and hog-tied the cow. He examined the brand with his fingertips, feeling for an old brand welt under the freshly burned Ladder *7*. It took perhaps fifteen minutes to find what he was looking for—a two or three-year-old brand welt over which the Ladder *7* had been run. The old brand was a Flag. Henry turned the cow loose and roped another. It took only a little while to read the Block iron that had been changed to the Ladder *7*.

It was risky work. If Zeke Tyler or any of the ZT men rode up on him, while he was making this unwarranted brand inspection, they'd kill him. But he had doubled and twisted on his course after he'd left Tyler and the three ZT men, and he had lost them in the broken hills.

Henry Stacy roped and examined the brand on each freshly branded Ladder *7* critter. It was getting daylight when he finished the job.

THAT long, timbered ridge that marked the border of the nester country was twenty or thirty miles distant. And Henry Stacy's horse was leg weary. He rode a few miles into the badlands and made a dry camp, a grubless camp. An empty belly was no novel experience for this cowpuncher. Feed for his horses and a rest for them was his only object in stopping.

He slid his bed from the packhorse and turned him loose to roll. His saddle horse he staked out, after the horse had rolled and grazed awhile. Now the saddle was on the big bay gelding's back again, cinch loosened to ease the burden of it while the animal grazed and got some rest.

Henry climbed on foot to a rocky point that commanded a fair view of the surrounding country. He sat with his saddle gun on the ground beside him, watching the country for miles around and puzzling out the business of the worked brands.

It all worked out in his cowpuncher mind, like bits of a puzzle fitted together. He had roped a few of the newly branded Ladder *7* calves, as well as the cows, and had examined the brands carefully. In each case, the calf had been branded *Z7*, with the lower part of the Z forming the top bar of the figure *7*. The rest of the brand was a lightly scorched brand that burned the hair but did not leave any permanent mark on the hide itself. In a few weeks, the only brand on the calves would be a *Z7*. The remainder of the brand that made it read Ladder *7* would be worn off.

So that now, if some suspicious cowhand took the trouble to inspect these freshly branded Ladder *7* cows and calves, he'd rope the cow, find that the original Block or Flag brand had been made into a Ladder *7*. Chances were a hundred to one he'd never rope the calf to examine its brand. He'd see the calf in the Ladder *7* iron, and would accuse Blake Lawton and his men of brand working. Nobody but a shrewd cowhand or seasoned brand inspector would suspect that the calf was wearing a cleverly run *Z7* under the hair burned Ladder *7*—and, when weaning time came along, that *Z7* could, by a single stroke of a running iron, be made into Zeke Tyler's ZT iron.

So here was the idea: if the owners of the Flag or Block irons got suspicious and examined those newly branded Ladder *7* cows and found their own irons underneath, they'd accuse Blake Lawton of rustling and brand changing. Nobody but Blake Lawton would accuse Zeke Tyler of the job.

If the brand changing went undetect-

ed, which it most likely would, because this was ZT range where outsiders were treated as law-breaking trespassers, in a few weeks there would be a Ladder 7 cow with a Z7 calf following her.

Henry Stacy knew that the Block and the Flag irons were owned by nesters who belonged to the so-called Maverick Pool. In the course of a short ride, he'd discovered half a dozen of the Maverick Pool cattle with the brands changed. There were bound to be a lot more nester strays on the ZT range. Zeke Tyler was not content, then, to steal from Blake Lawton. He was rustling Maverick Pool cattle and doing it so cleverly that if the changed brands were discovered, Blake Lawton and his Ladder 7 men would be blamed.

Probably ten or a dozen small outfits comprised the Maverick Pool, on yonder side of the timbered ridge. Zeke Tyler was getting away with as slick a bit of rustling as Henry Stacy had ever seen or heard of.

Henry Stacy lazed on the ground, smoking, smiling softly to himself. He'd stumbled on a secret that would smash both Blake Lawton and Zeke Tyler.

CHAPTER SIX

Gun-Odds Evened

PINEY RIDGE marked the eastern boundary between the small ranchers of the Maverick Pool and the two big outfits, the Ladder 7 and ZT spreads. Antelope Creek was the ZT's north boundary, the Ladder 7's south boundary. And where Antelope Creek forked and was lost in the rough Piney Hills, lay the neutral strip of country; the school section and, ten miles west of Schoolhouse Coulee, Lew Dahl's Whiskey Camp.

It occurred to Henry Stacy, as he sat on a rimrock butte and studied the country, that if the ZT and the Ladder 7 outfits would combine and shove on across Piney Ridge, into the country held by the ranchers of the Maverick Pool, they'd have one of the finest and biggest cow outfits in the country. If Blake Lawton and Zeke Tyler would bury the hatchet, smoke the peace pipe, work together, they could crowd the smaller outfits off the map of that part of the cow country. But Blake Lawton and Zeke Tyler were sworn enemies.

Henry Stacy could locate the place on Antelope Creek where Lew Dahl's Whiskey Camp lay hidden in the rough hills. Lew Dahl must figure in this puzzle Henry Stacy was trying to fit together. The whiskey peddler, Henry knew from the little things Joe Tabor had dropped, was sitting behind a big stack of blue chips in this game. He made his corn likker and sold it to Ladder 7 and ZT men alike. It was at his Whiskey Camp that the cowpunchers from both outfits met on neutral ground. Range quarrels were supposed to be forgotten when men drank at Lew Dahl's pine board bar. Joe Tabor had told Henry Stacy that, when they rode there. And within an hour after Tabor had told him that, Henry had seen Lee Murray murdered. That, he reckoned, was honor among thieves.

And yet, as he studied the country, mapping it in his mind, puzzling things out, fitting bits into the jig-saw puzzle, yanking them out again, re-fitting them in new places, he found himself more bewildered than ever. There were a few bits of the puzzle that didn't fit anywhere.

Henry stretched out full length on the rimrock and dozed. . . .

It was the distant sound of shooting that brought Henry Stacy awake with a jerk. He was on his feet, his saddle gun in his hand, even as his eyes blinked open.

FROM his high vantage point, he could see a swift-moving drama being enacted not half a mile below. A man on a

gray horse was racing for the foot of the butte and the shelter of its rocks and scrub pines. Behind him were five riders, crowding him hard, shooting at him. But the range was too far, and their bullets were falling short.

Henry watched the chase for a long minute. The man on the gray horse would make the butte unless a chance bullet struck him or his horse.

Henry didn't know who the man on the gray horse could be. Nor could he recognize any of the five men crowding him. But the odds were five to one. Henry wondered, grinning twistedly, if he'd be taking Zeke Tyler's or Blake Lawton's part when he helped cut down the odds.

He quit the rimrock, and ran down the steep slope of the timber-spotted butte. It took only a few seconds to bridle his horse and tighten the cinch. He cut down through the scrub pines, jumping rocks and dodging brush. He reined up behind a patch of boulders, and quit the saddle with a leap. Off to his left a little, and a hundred yards below, he saw the man on the gray horse gain the edge of the timber. The five men were less than three hundrd yards behind.

Henry lifted his carbine, let out a wild cowboy yell, and squeezed the trigger. And as fast as he could work the lever of his carbine, he sent bullets whistling close to the heads of the five riders. They pulled up, confused, bewildered.

Henry called down to the man who had quit the gray horse. "Up here, pardner! If it's fightin' them five brave warriors want, let's give 'em a belly-full!"

Then Henry recognized two of the men as ZT riders who had been with Zeke Tyler last night.

"Come and git it, you ZT skunks! You got orders to hang Henry Stacy to one of the schoolmarm's cottonwoods. You'll never git a better chance to try 'er. But git this straight, hombres! I'm done shootin' over your heads. From now on I'm playin' marbles for keeps!"

The five ZT men were caught out on a strip of almost bald ridge. They were plain targets, and knew it. They would have to cross over a hundred yards of ground that afforded no shelter larger than knee-high greasewood and a scanty patch or two of sagebrush. They sat their horses, arguing hotly among themselves, while the man they had been chasing made his way on foot up the slope and, taking advantage of the shelter offered by brush and rocks, neared Henry's rocky barricade. His head and shoulders showed around some rocks.

Henry gave a grunt of surprise. "Joe! Joe Tabor!" Henry's gun swung to cover the battered Ladder 7 man.

"Don't shoot, Henry!" cried Tabor. "Don't kill me, pardner!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Death Visits Schoolhouse Coulee

THERE were four bullet holes in Joe Tabor's tough hide. He had lost a lot of blood, and his face was drawn and gray with suffering.

"Blake Lawton tried to kill me," he told Henry shortly. "Yonder they come—five of Zeke Tyler's pet snakes. My string's about played out, Stacy. But I'm takin' a couple of them snakes to hell with me for company."

Joe Tabor's carbine barrel rested on a rock to steady his aim. As the five ZT men charged across the open space, Joe's gun took its toll. Joe was half dead from gunshot wounds, but he did not miss. He knocked three ZT men from their saddles. Henry wounded a fourth. The fifth man whirled his horse and ran for it. Joe's saddle gun spat fire. The bullet caught the fleeing man in the back, and he reeled and toppled sideways, falling to the ground in a kicking, twitching heap.

"Not bad target shootin' for a dyin' man, Henry," said Joe Tabor. "I only

wish two of 'em had been Zeke Tyler and Blake Lawton. Blake put two of these slugs in me, back at Antelope Springs. I wasn't plumb unconscious, savvy, when I laid there in the cabin and heard Blake Lawton tell you to finish me before I come awake. I aimed to kill him. But he sorta beat me to it. He shot the hell outa me and left me for dead.

"I taken his trail. Follered him to Lew Dahl's Whiskey Camp. Got there too late to ketch him. Lew said he'd rode on to Schoolhouse Coulee to see the little schoolmarm and try his luck at lovemakin'. I was headed for Schoolhouse Coulee when them five ZT snakes jumped me. It was dark then. I think they mistook me for you. They opened up on me and shot me twice, and I got two of them. There was seven of 'em in the bunch. They'd been huntin' you and a United States Marshal named Bill Marvin. This—"

"Bill Marvin?" Henry Stacy cut in.

"Yeah. He's been sent here to help the Stock Association men wipe out rustlin'. Seems like the Association men has bad luck just about the time they find enough evidence to make an arrest. Ed Bush was one Association man that never got to make his final report. There was two-three more that tried the stock detective game and lost. Lee Murray was the last un. So the Stock Association hired the best man in the country, Bill Marvin.

"Blake Lawton offered me a thousand dollars to kill you. He told me you was another damned detective like Ed Bush. I aimed to kill you in that fight. Instead, you give me the worst workin'-over a man ever had. But you wouldn't finish me when Blake Lawton offered you a job and told you to write your own ticket. You're a white man. Mebbyso you are a stock detective. I'm goin' where the law can't get me. A few minutes and I'll be ridin' the unknown trail to hell.

"I got a thousand for killin' Ed Bush. In my chaps pocket, Henry, you'll find the last official report Ed Bush had on him when I killed him at the line camp at Antelope Springs. There's enough in that report to hang Blake Lawton. Blake and Zeke let on to be enemies. All the time they was pardners, playin' enemies, workin' in cahoots to rob the nesters.

"I reckon Lee Murray's report will hang Zeke Tyler if it's ever found. Lew Dahl didn't find it when he searched Lee Murray's dead body. It's my guess that Lee give that report to the little schoolmarm. That's what Blake Lawton figgers Lee done with it. Blake Lawton is goin' to git that incriminatin' report from her. And, mister, his way of doin' it ain't goin' to be noways purty ner gentlemanly. Zeke Tyler, fer all his ugly talk and bullyin' ways, is a plumb Sunday school boy alongside Blake when it comes to women. . . . 'Specially when this gal has been playin' the game she has, makin' plumb chumps outa him and Zeke Tyler both, workin' in with the law. Her main job at Schoolhouse Coulee wasn't teachin' kids from the ranches their A. B. C.'s. She was helpin' the stock detectives git evidence. She's Della Marvin, Bill Marvin's daughter. I never seen her, Henry, but they say she's shore worth. . . ."

A spasm of pain racked Joe Tabor's bullet-riddled body. He died a few minutes later, cursing Blake Lawton and Zeke Tyler with equal and unbiased fervor.

IT WAS dusk when Henry Stacy mounted his horse and headed for Schoolhouse Coulee at a long trot. In his pocket was a blood-spattered *document* that had been made out by the murdered Ed Bush, stock detective. A glance through its hand-written pages told Henry that Blake Lawton was guilty of rustling cattle from the Maverick Pool ranchers and likewise guilty of the killing of three law officers at Chinook, ten years ago. Those three law officers had been on his

trail. And Ed Bush's report stated that Blake Lawton and Zeke Tyler had both been members of the old Lone Star gang of outlaws down in Texas.

Joe Tabor had been right. This blood-stained document would hang both Blake Lawton and Zeke Tyler. Those two men were, perhaps the sole survivors of that notorious gang of Texas outlaws. Lew Dahl was mentioned as a possible third.

But that was not the thing that drove Henry Stacy through the gathering shadows of the night. It was the thought of the black-haired girl at Schoolhouse Coulee. He pushed his horse to the limit.

One ZT man out of those five who had trailed Joe Tabor had gotten away, wounded. He'd headed in the direction of Lew Dahl's Whiskey Camp. Henry discounted him now. He hoped to find Blake Lawton at Schoolhouse Coulee. He hoped to reach there before the handsome, cold-blooded owner of the Ladder 7 outfit did the girl any harm.

Darkness settled around him. His horse was dripping with sweat, blowing hard, when he sighted a light from the top of the ridge, half a mile above the shadowy buildings among the cottonwoods at Schoolhouse Coulee.

He heard a woman's voice down there, calling out in fright or anger. He heard the big black dog's roaring bark. Then came the crack of a six-shooter. Henry Stacy took the slant at a run that taxed the last bit of strength and gameness in the brave-hearted horse under him.

His coming was bold, loud with the thud of his horse's hoofs. A hundred yards from the buildings, he saw the light in the cabin go out abruptly. He heard a girl's choked cry of warning.

He kicked his feet from the stirrups, quit his running horse without checking its speed. Landing on his feet, he fell rolling, muscles relaxed to take the fall, and was on his feet again, his six-shooter in his hand.

Spurts of gun-flame came from the black maw of the cabin doorway. Bullets snarled around him, ricocheted, whining, into the darkness.

The girl must be inside the dark cabin. Henry Stacy dared not risk shooting at Blake Lawton, for fear of hitting her. He knew the man shooting at him must be Lawton, because that was the Ladder 7 owner's saddled horse out there between the cabin and the barn.

Henry made a dash for the shelter of the horse corral. He reached it in a shower of lead. He crouched there, panting, hardly feeling the sting of a flesh wound in his thigh, where one of Lawton's bullets had ripped a furrow.

As he gained the shelter of the corral, Lawton's voice called out from the cabin, unnatural, thick: "I'll dicker with you, Zeke! We're both into this too deep to be killin' one another. This is no time to quarrel. Did you get Marvin?"

Henry Stacy scowled, puzzled for a moment. Blake Lawton had mistaken him for Zeke Tyler in the darkness.

He called out a muffled answer, curt, thick-voiced, a single word: *"No."*

"Then we got to stick together, quit this shootin' at each other. Della has papers on her that'll hang us both and Lew Dahl with us. She got away in the dark. Her damned dog charged me, nearly chewed my throat apart before I could kill the damned brute. She's out there somewhere, Zeke. Stop her before she gets away. Stop her if you have to do it with a bullet. We'll get Bill Marvin later. She's not armed. I got her gun. I was rattled when you rode up. Thought you was Marvin. But that ain't Marvin's horse. It's. . . . It's not a ZT horse—Who in hell are you, anyhow?"

"I'm Stacy! Henry Stacy! Right now I'm reppin' for John Law and Bill Marvin. I want you, mister. Will you surrender and stand trial? Or will I collect bounty on your dead carcass?"

FROM the dark cabin, Blake Lawton's voice cursed him thickly. But Henry Stacy hardly heard. He'd caught the sound of his own name being called out cautiously from the shadow of the corral not thirty feet from where he crouched.

"Henry Stacy! Don't shoot! I'm Della Marvin! Bill Marvin's daughter!"

He crept along against the pole corral to where the girl was crouched.

"You're hurt?" he whispered.

"No. Nothing to bother about. I think my arm's broken, where he twisted it getting my gun. Black Ace saved my life. Lawton had grabbed me, had me at his mercy. Black Ace jumped him. He shot Ace. I got away. . . . Henry Stacy, I treated you like you were—"

"Forget it," said Henry, as the girl's hand gripped his arm. "Let's have a look at that busted arm. I bet it hurts."

"After you'd gone, I remembered. I was at your trial. Saw you sentenced to hang for killing Bob Gilford. My dad killed Gilford. I knew that. But he couldn't clear you then. Only last week he was able to clear your record. I didn't recognize you when you rode up to my cabin. Dad and I had just gotten back from a ride. I'd taken him to where I'd hidden some papers Lee Murray had given me to keep, the papers Lawton and Zeke Tyler are after now. Dad rode to the Whiskey Camp to get Lew Dahl. He's working alone. I'm afraid for him. Give me a gun, and I'll hold Blake here if I have to kill him. If you'd ride to Lew Dahl's Whiskey Camp—"

Henry Stacy's fingers were examining the girl's arm. It was not broken, only dislocated at the shoulder. He'd had some experience with this sort of injury, having thrown his own shoulder out twice. As the girl talked, he worked her arm into the right position. He gave a quick, deft wrench. There was a sharp outcry of pain and the shoulder joint plopped back into place. And Henry found himself holding the limp form of Della Marvin in his arms. She'd fainted.

Henry Stacy never knew what prompted Blake Lawton to act as he did. The girl's piercing scream of pain brought the Ladder *7* cowman from the cabin on a run. He ran straight towards the corral, cursing thickly. Henry Stacy let the limp form of the girl slide from his arms, and he leaped to his feet. Lawton sighted him and commenced shooting.

For the first time in his life, Henry Stacy was shooting to kill. He was standing on his feet, the gun in his hand belching flame. There was no time to think of fear or hatred or any other thing. He had to kill a man before that man killed him. He shot without aiming, his gun no higher than the level of his belt.

He saw Blake Lawton stagger, stumble as if tripping over something, and go down shooting, as Henry's gun hammer snapped on an exploded shell. In a short space of a few split-seconds, the gun duel was over. Blake Lawton was dead. And by some miracle, not one of the Ladder *7* man's slugs had struck their mark. Save for that flesh wound, that was neither dangerous nor very painful, Henry was unmarked by Lawton's deadly lead.

Della Marvin was just regaining consciousness. She did not protest as Henry's arms held her comfortingly.

"There was shooting," she said. "Or was I just imagining things?"

"Blake Lawton," Henry told her, "is dead. I had to kill him."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Whiskey Camp Gun-Trap

DELLA MARVIN insisted on riding with Henry Stacy when he put his saddle on one of her two saddle horses and headed for the Whiskey Camp.

"I'll feel a lot safer with you than I would staying alone at Schoolhouse

Coulee. Let me go with you. I've got my gun. I know how to use it. My dad might be needing all the help we can give him. Let me go along, Henry."

"If you'll promise to do what I tell you when we get there."

"You give the orders. I'll take 'em. If there's a gun fight, I want to help, though."

"You'd be in the way, Della. Gun fightin' is a man's game. Fork your horse and we'll git there."

He'd put a tight bandage on her injured shoulder. He had to help her mount now. And as his arm went around her waist, there was a long moment when their heads touched, when her black curly hair was in his face. And Henry Stacy's heart pounded like a hammer against his ribs. Then she was in the saddle. She looked down at him, laughing a little shakily.

"If you'd kiss me then," she said, "I'd have thought you meant the ugly things you hinted when I sent you away cussing me."

"I was jealous," he blurted. "Jealous of every man that ever looked at you. I didn't know it was your dad who'd just rode off before I got there. And Tabor had said things."

"You have a right to think I'm bad, Henry. I flirted with Blake Lawton and led him along because I wanted to learn things about the rustling that's gone on. I've worked with dad before. In Wyoming I helped dad get evidence against Bob Gilford before and after he was killed. It's dangerous work and there are times when I hate it. But sometimes I'm valuable, and dad needs me.

"I wish you'd believe this, Henry. I've never loved any man. Never let any man really make love to me. I never really wanted any man to kiss me until tonight—just now, when you didn't. There were times during your trial when it took all the strength of will I had to keep from getting up on the stand and telling that judge and jury the truth. I would cry myself to sleep in the dark. I dreamed of you riding alone, hunted, sick at heart, hurt; dreamed of them bringing your bullet-torn body back to Laramie. . . . When I could have said a dozen words and saved you all that!

"I've cried and prayed and promised I'd find you and tell you I wanted to go with you wherever your trail led, so that I could share your dangers until dad cleared you. Whatever you've suffered, Henry, I've shared it. It would make me feel so much better right now if you'd hold my hand or something. . . ."

Henry Stacy leaned from his saddle. He was trembling when his arm went gently around her shoulder and he kissed her. It was as if they had loved one another always. Then the lights of Lew Dahl's Whiskey Camp showed in the darkness ahead. They reined up in the shadows of the scrub pines.

"You stay here," Henry told her. "I'll go on foot and do some scoutin'. Hide here. If you hear shootin', don't show up till I holler. Promise to stay here."

"You're the boss. I can take orders, dear. I love you, Henry. Since the minute I was born, I've loved you. Sounds silly, but that's how I feel. God bring you back to me. . . You and Dad."

HENRY STACY left her there and went on afoot, keeping to the black shadows, making as little noise as possible.

Three saddled horses stood at the hitchrack in front of Lew Dahl's saloon. The door yawned open, showing the whiskey peddler behind the bar. Bill Marvin stood at the end of the bar, his back to the log wall. There was a six-shooter in his hand. It covered Dahl and two ZT punchers who stood at the bar, arms lifted.

"You were a little slow getting to your gun, Lew," Bill Marvin was saying. "I could have killed you, but I'm savin' you

for hangin'. I'll take these two ZT men along with you, Lew, when I take you to Chinook to stand trial for murder. I'm goin' to hogtie the three of you and lock you in the cellar. Zeke Tyler will show up here, sooner or later. When he does, I'll git him. And then I'll go after Blake Lawton. . . . The last of the old Lone Star gang! Three of the orneriest blackguards that ever went unhung! I should kill you here and now, Lew. . . ."

Henry Stacy saw a black blot move in the deep, thick shadow under the sill of the open window. He saw the lift of a gun barrel. He heard that dry, hacking cough he so well remembered having heard before in that same spot.

Henry called out harshly, "Drop that gun, you bushwhackin' son—!"

The man, crouched under the window, whirled and shot. The slug ripped Henry's left shoulder. And as Henry Stacy reeled, he was shooting. The black blot had straightened. So that the man was outlined against the lighted window.

Gun spewing fire, he swayed drunkenly, coughing blood. Queer how that dry, hacking cough sounded through the echoes of gunfire. Or else Henry Stacy's imagination was playing him tricks. But it was not imagination that revealed the identity of the coughing killer. It was Zeke Tyler.

And Zeke Tyler was going down fighting. Dead on his feet, his heart torn by the first shot that had struck him, his shots were going wild. He collapsed like a long, empty sack, thumbing back the hammer of his gun as he slumped to the ground, dead.

Bill Marvin's gun had sent that first slug through Zeke Tyler's heart. Out of the tail of his eye, the grizzled peace officer had been watching that shadow moving outside the open window. Bill Marvin had seen it. Bill Marvin had, in fact, set the trap for himself—as it had been set for Lee Murray. But instead of the dice box Lee Murray had held, Marvin's hand was filled with a six-shooter.

He'd listened for that dry, hacking cough, that was an old nervous habit of Zeke's, as he might have waited for the whirring warning of a rattlesnake. So even as Henry Stacy had shouted his lusty warning, Bill Marvin had taken a snapshot at the ambushed killer outside the open window. He'd sent a .45 bullet through Zeke Tyler's heart. Then his gun swung, still spewing flame, in a short, swift arc, mowing down Lew Dahl with two quick shots. Dahl dropped in a lifeless heap behind his pineboard bar. And the two ZT men, horror and fear frozen on their faces, backed out of the line of fire, their hands held high.

THROUGH the gun echoes that filled the saloon, gray-hazed with powder-smoke, United States Marshal Bill Marvin heard his name. Somebody outside was calling him. The veteran peace officer leaned heavily against the bar, hanging to it with his left hand. One of Lew Dahl's bullets was in his chest. He was about to put out the lamp with a bullet, because here in the lighted saloon he'd be an easy target for enemy guns. And he still had Blake Lawton on his list of enemies unaccounted for.

"Don't shoot, Bill Marvin," he heard the voice outside calling. "It's me, Henry Stacy, that's comin' in."

"The hell you say!" grinned the old law officer. "Come in, Henry, and welcome. Long time no see you, son." Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth, spread through the stubble of gray whiskers on his square, blunt jaw.

Then Henry Stacy came in and caught Bill Marvin as the latter's grip slid loose from the edge of the bar. Henry eased the marshal's big frame onto one of the barroom armchairs. He told the ZT men flatly that he'd kill them if they tried any tricks. He ordered one of them to get

water and clean towels for bandages, while the other fetched whiskey.

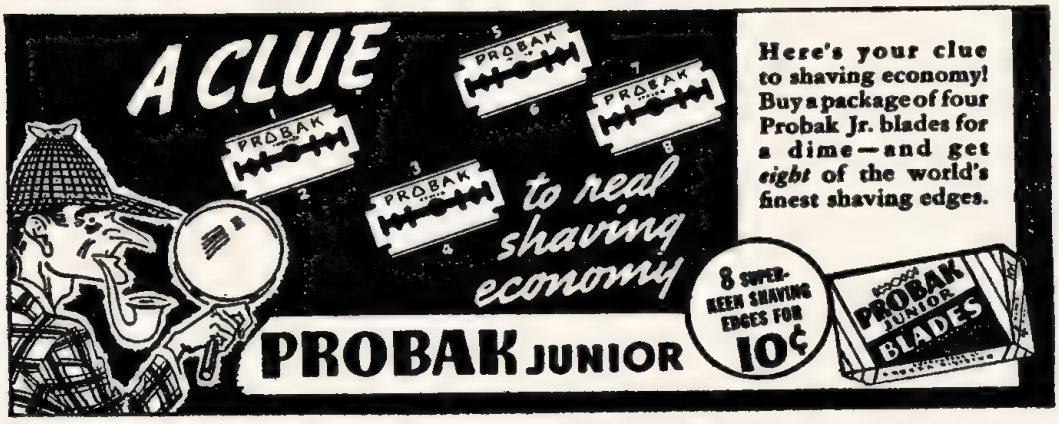
Bill Marvin looked up at him, a grin on his gray face. "That was you that yelled to Zeke Tyler outside, eh, Henry? I knowed Zeke had slipped up out there. It was cuttin' 'er fine, Henry, but it was the one way to git him and Lew Dahl both. At that, I'd like as not have lost if you hadn't drawed Zeke's first bullet. You got a bad lookin' shoulder, from the blood you're losin'. And there's still Blake Lawton to account for. We got to git patched up in shape to make a ride, son. Sooner or later Blake Lawton is goin' to show up at Schoolhouse Coulee. We got to be there to nab him. Another trap I got set, Henry. Della is the bait. You never met my young 'un, Henry. Della is the schoolmarm at Schoolhouse Coulee. . . . If I ain't gone loco, she's standin' there in the door!"

Years afterward Bill Marvin still claimed that he got the biggest shock of his life there at the Whiskey Camp that night.

"I've been in a thousand and ten tights," he'd chuckle, "and never batted an eye or turned a hair. That slug Lew Dahl put in my off lung was nothin'. And even seeing young Henry Stacy walkin' in, a smokin' gun in his hand, didn't seem too much unreal. But gents, when my own daughter Della, her that had always treated men like they wasn't worth botherin' with, come into that saloon, I got a shock that knocked me cross-eyed, bow-legged and kinky-haired. It's like she don't see me. She heads for Henry Stacy, her face white, her eyes a-shinin', and before you kin say scat she's throwed her arms around him and is kissin' him. And him as bloody and dirty and whiskered as a terrier. Yeah, sobbin' and a-motherin' that young cowpuncher somethin' scandalous. . . .

"I shore had need of the bottle I grabs from that ZT man that stood by my chair a-gawkin', booger-eyed as I was. I still claim I had that quart two-thirds drunk up before either Della or Henry Stacy remembered I was there amongst 'em and, fer all they knowed, a-dyin' hard and painful and a breathin' out my dyin' statement. . . . Bullets or knives or broncs or stampedes, lightin' ner earthquakes never ever unnerved me, gentlemen. But when that Della kid of mine throwed her arms around that shot-to-hell, blood-smeared, whiskered young cowhand, Henry Stacy, I come as near faintin' as a lily-fingered dude. Things like that shore breaks a man's nerves, makes him claw fer a likker bottle. . . . Drink hearty, gents. To my two young uns—Della and Henry Stacy. Both of 'em, gentlemen, worth fightin' for."

THE END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A Coward Guards the Pass

Bob blinked the blood from his eyes. As he fired again, he saw McDade waver in his saddle.

By JOHN G. PEARSOL

(Author of "The Stage Trails Lose a Renegade," etc.)

Young Bob, Sheriff Dan Matthews' boy, was a foundling, a Matthews in name alone—and rank, unreasoning cowardice festered his heart. . . . He knew he must run from those five killers' guns, even though flight meant death for the man to whom he owed his life—and black dishonor to all who bore his name!

IN THE opinion of Bob Matthews, old Dan Matthews was about the swellest gent that ever straddled a bronc. Dan Matthews had taken Bob in when Bob was just a button, without a home, a name, or a future, and had given him all those things. He had picked him up as a ragged urchin and given him an honorable name. He'd given him a home, and a chance at a future.

Young Bill Matthews, too, was one fine fellow. Bill was old Dan's son, and he accepted Bob just as though they'd been blood-brothers. Bill seemed to be sincerely glad when old Dan did things for Bob. And Dan Matthews was fair as hell. When he got Bill, his own son, a pony or a new saddle or a fancy pair of boots, he got the same thing for his adopted son, Bob. There was no partiality in old Dan Matthews. There was no jealousy in young Bill. They were two damn swell folks that young Bob Matthews would go to hell for in a minute. . . .

Old Dan Matthews was a sheriff. He rodded the tough county of Wild Horse. He'd raised both Bill and Bob to follow in his footsteps. He'd pinned deputy badges on their vests and given them jobs riding for him. They were working for

him now as they rode across the flats on the trail of McDade, the bandit.

McDade, with his crew of hellions, was somewhere in the hills ahead, trying to make his way into Mexico. Old Dan Matthews was trying to head McDade off. He had a posse off to the north of where young Bill and Bob were riding, and was closing the net about McDade.

Young Bob Matthews was proud of this chance to be of real service to Dan Matthews. This would be their first real scrap, their first taste of battle, and Bob's eyes burned bright with excitement. His heart beat fast in his breast. He looked at Bill, and Bill's eyes were bright too, his face flushed. They rode slowly along, down a slope where a coulee branched two ways to meet again farther on up the trail.

"McDade might come down either one of these," Bill told Bob. "How about you going up one, and me taking the other? We'll meet up where they join."

Bob Matthews nodded. He rode on alone, and the sternness of this task came suddenly to him. In the silence, that was broken now only by his horse's hoofs, he thought more seriously of the fight that might come if he met McDade. He thought of McDade, and his evil name, and of the terror he had spread throughout the West. As he thought of the men McDade had killed, Bob Matthews stopped for a moment. What if he should meet McDade while he was alone? McDade would kill him!

Bob Matthews' heart beat faster as he thought of that. A chill raced up his spine. That strange sensation startled him even as it made him cold with dread. Bob tried to tell himself it was not fear. He wasn't afraid. He was excited. This would be his first fight. He'd get over it in a moment.

But he didn't get over it. As he pushed slowly on again, the clink of his bronc's hoofs sounded thunderously loud in his ears. Every rock, every bush, every crevice in that ravine, was a possible hiding place for McDade and his crew. Bob Matthews' heart hammered furiously against his breast now. His throat was dry. A tight band pressed about his head, squeezing his brain, throttling his mind. He imagined every shadow to be the shadow of a horseman, hiding, watching, waiting for him to pass. . . .

HE TURNED his bronc suddenly, and climbed the steep wall of the ravine. He had to get out of this place. It was a trap. He couldn't stand it. He was yellow as hell, and the knowledge sickened him.

He topped the rise and rode across the flat, to look down into the ravine where Bill had gone. He was thankful that Bill had not been along to see that awful light of fear he knew to be in his eyes. He was glad old Dan Matthews had not been there to see it.

Then, far below, down in the other ravine bottom, Bob Matthews saw Bill. Bill had stopped. He seemed to be listening. He stayed still for a moment, then rode on again. Bob sat his horse up on the rim of the ravine and watched Bill, trying to compose himself before he let Bill catch sight of him.

Then Bill stopped again. The rattle of hoofs, from up ahead, rang out on the still air. Bill let his hand fall down toward his gun, then took it away. He turned his horse and tried to run, but the horse stumbled, fell, and sprawled Bill Matthews out of the saddle. Bill rose and scurried toward a rock, but stopped before he reached it. He stopped still and raised his hands up in the air. He was an abject figure as he stood there, his hands high, his whole body slumped, watching the riders who came down the trail toward him.

The riders were McDade and his crew. Bob Matthews recognized McDade by his

massive form and long, black whiskers. He saw McDade stop, heard the faint sound of his booming laugh, heard him yell something about a yellow badge-toter. Then Bill Matthews screamed with fear as McDade's gun swung up. McDade shot Bill Matthews callously, coldly, as he would have shot a snake. Then the four outlaws rode on.

Bob Matthews could do nothing. Even if he had not been frozen by fear, he could have done nothing. He was too far away. The ra ine sides were too steep for him to get down in time to help. He watched McDade gallop out of sight, his three men behind him.

Bob Matthews circled and cut down into the ravine. Bill Matthews was down there, dying, perhaps dead. That thought dazed Bob. But the thing that dazed him most was the fact that he knew Bill to be as much of a coward as he himself was, a rank crawling worm who had not even tried to pull his gun when McDade came into sight.

As he rode along, Bob Matthews heard the boom of a gun. There were three fast shots, a pause, then two more. He hurried and came up to where Bill Matthews lay. Bill had a gun in his hand, trying to reload it. He had been shooting in the air to bring Bob to him. He dropped the gun when he saw Bob. He sank back on the ground, and deep, shuddering sobs racked him.

Bob dismounted and took Bill's head in his lap. He could feel the fear in Bill as he held him. He could see the deep, sharp horror of it in Bill's face as Bill looked up at him. Bill had a great, spreading stain of red on his shirt front.

"I was afraid," he gasped. "I'm—I'm still afraid. I'm—I'm afraid to die, Bob. I'm—" Then he sobbed again. "I shot to bring you. I—I didn't want to—to die alone. Hold me—Bob—hold me—"

Bob Matthews hugged Bill's head up to him. He tried to talk to him, tried to tell him he'd be okay. But how could one coward console another? And he knew Bill wouldn't be okay. He was dying. He was nearly gone. He was dying, with those horrible shudders of fear racking him. Bob Matthews felt tears misting his eyes as he sat there. Five minutes ago, Bill Matthews had been full of life. His face had been flushed with hope. In another minute he'd be dead.

The sound of pounding hoofs came to Bob's ears. He knew it was the posse, because it came from up the ravine and McDade had gone on down it. He sat there, his dusty face streaked with tears, watching through his blurred eyes while old Dan Matthews raced toward them at the head of the posse.

DAN stopped. He dismounted. He looked at Bill, and Bill was dead. A stricken look came to old Dan's face. Bob met his eyes, with a pang in his heart. Dan was going to take this hard as hell. He was hard hit now. He'd take it doubly hard if he knew how Bill had died.

"What happened, Bob?" Dan asked softly.

"We separated," Bob told him. "I came up on one side of this double-barreled ravine, and Bill came up on the other. I heard shots and cut across. When I hit the edge, it was so steep I couldn't get down. I had to circle. But I saw Bill. He—he was fighting like hell, Dan. He—he killed two of them before they got him. And McDade carted his dead off with him. Bill was here alone, when I got here."

Tiredly, as though his arms were heavy, old Dan Matthews waved down the trail. "Take after that murderin' devil," he told the rest of the posse. "I—I—somehow, I gotta stay here with Bill for a while."

Bob helped Dan load Bill on a horse They took him to town, gave him to the undertaker. Old Dan went up the street, with his shoulders slumped, his head

bowed in terrible grief. Bob Matthews had his head bowed, too. Losing Bill was a blow to Bob. Bill had been more than a brother to him. He'd been a partner and a brother combined. He'd died with his head in Bob's lap, with his fear-stricken eyes looking up to Bob for comfort. Those tears back there hadn't been hysteria with Bob Matthews. They'd been real as hell. Grief weighted Bob down like a cold, leaden weight on his heart—grief and sorrow and the misery of his own newly acquired knowledge that he, Bob Matthews, was just as great a coward as Bill had been.

They buried Bill Matthews next day, and old Dan had a great rock hauled down from the hills. He had it placed at the head of young Bill's grave, and had an inscription carved on it:

BILL MATTHEWS

A brave man who died doing his duty.

That rock, with its inscription, meant an awful lot to Dan Matthews. Bob Matthews knew that if it had not been for the fact that Dan thought Bill had died bravely, with his gun in his hand, facing the enemy, old Dan would have broken down. And Bob knew, too, that Dan Matthews lived only for the day when he'd have another crack at McDade. He knew that Dan prayed for that day to come, when he could ride out again, his guns slapping his hips, to try to kill the man who had slain his son. And Bob was fully aware, too, that Dan Matthews counted on Bob going with him. Dan had told him so.

"Some day," Dan had said, "our time will come, Bob. Some day we can trade lead again with that murderin' skunk. You and me can face him with the lead from our guns, and pound the hulk of him back down to hell where he belongs."

Dan believed that. He believed he'd find McDade, and kill him. Bob knew that if old Dan couldn't have believed that, he would have quit. And Bob believed it, too. Somehow, intuitively, he knew it would happen. He sensed that someday he and Dan would face McDade and his crew of killers.

And Bob knew that when that happened, he would crack. He knew he'd cringe and crawl, and that fear would rise up to throttle the manhood from him. He knew he'd never fire a shot, and that old Dan Matthews would be shamed. Dan would be just as shamed as though it had been Bill who had crawled, because Bob knew that old Dan Matthews thought an awful lot of him. He knew that if it had been he, instead of Bill, who lay there in the cemetery, old Dan would go there just as he did now. He would stop and take off his hat in tribute to a brave man who had given his life to his duty. And that proud smile would come, just as it came now. . . .

AS THE weeks passed, Dan Matthews' trips down to the cemetery had become a ritual. But talk began to buzz about in town that young Bob Matthews wasn't just what he should be. Folks whispered that somebody in the posse had examined the slope where Bob had claimed it was too steep to go down to help Bill, and they'd said it wasn't too steep. They whispered that Bob Matthews was yellow, and Bob knew they whispered it. Old Dan knew they whispered it, too. But he said nothing to Bob about it.

Bob Matthews sat in the sheriff's office now and watched Dan coming up the street. Dan's head was high. His shoulders were back. That half smile was on his lips. He had just left Bill's grave, just finished reading that inscription about Bill Matthews giving his life for his duty. He stopped suddenly, turned and walked over to where a group of men stood on the walk outside the saloon.

Bob rose and went out on the porch.

He started to hurry down the street. It looked as though Dan was mad as hell about something. His voice came to Bob as Bob drew nearer to him.

"I looked at the slope, too. Mebby a man could go down it. But it's a cinch he couldn't do any fighting while he was about it. There's always somebody ready to point the finger of suspicion at a man, but nobody ready to give him the benefit of a doubt."

"I still say that Bob Matthews is yellow," said the tall man to whom Dan had spoken. "I guess you can't put a man in jail for saying that, can you?"

Old Dan took a quick step forward. His fist whizzed up and cracked against the tall man's jaw. He stepped back and rubbed his knuckles while the fellow slid down the building side and sat there, staring stupidly at him.

"No," said Dan Matthews coldly. "I can't put a man in jail for saying that. But I can call him a damn liar, Rawlins. And that's what you are! My own son was killed, and I loved him. Bob Matthews is not my own son, but I think as much of him as I did of Bill. He's a Matthews, even if the blood ain't in him. When you blacken his name, you blacken mine. Remember that!"

Bob stood there and watched old Dan come on up the street. Bob had to swallow hard a couple of times to get rid of that funny lump that had come into his throat when old Dan was talking. Such loyalty as Dan's made Bob feel funny as hell. He turned and started up the street with Dan, and kept his face straight ahead so old Dan couldn't see his eyes.

"You heard that, I reckon, Bob?" asked Dan, as they neared the office. "You heard what he said, and what I said?"

"Yes," said Bob. "I heard it all."

"Well, don't pay any attention to it, son," Dan said gently. "It makes no difference to me what they say. Mebby you could have gone down that slope. But you couldn't have helped Bill by doing it. I meant what I said back there. From the time I took you, when you was a tiny tike, you and Bill were both my boys. Now Bill is gone, and you're my only boy. You are just as much to me as Bill was. Your name is Matthews. I know you'll always live up to it."

Bob Matthews wanted to say something then. But he couldn't. He swallowed again and watched while old Dan went to his desk in the office and sorted the mail that had come by the morning stage. What Dan had said was pretty ironical, at that. Just as Bill was. . . . That was the truth. Bill had been the rankest kind of coward, and so was Bob.

Dan sorted over the letters. He opened one and sat there for a long time after he had read it. Finally he passed it over for Bob to read:

Sheriff of Wild Horse,

I've been hearing things. News travels even down here on the border. I've heard as how you had a whelp that was supposed to have shot it out with me and my gang up in the Wild Horse hills and damn near whipped us. Somebody from up that way had been talking in one of the saloons down here, so I'll tell you what really happened. This brat of yours was a yellow skunk. He crawled to me. He begged and whined. He didn't fire a shot. I killed him like I'd kill a snake. Since that's the kind of law you raise up that way, I'll be up again. You better throw away your badge before I get there, for when I meet you I'll give you the same medicine I gave your brat.

McDade.

Bob Matthews studied that letter overlong, kept his eyes cast down upon it, to keep from raising them to Dan's till he had his composure. He felt that Dan's eyes were burning on him. He felt the terrible emotion that gripped the old man.

"You never lied to me that I know of, Bob," old Dan's voice came, a little shakily, after a while. "When you was a kid you always told me the truth. So tell me

the truth now. Is McDade a liar?"

Bob Matthews raised his eyes from the letter. He looked Dan in the eye. He studied the lines of grief that had come into Dan's old face since Bill had been killed. He remembered the pride in that tiny smile after Dan's visits to the grave.

"McDade is the dirtest kind of a liar, Dan," he said positively. "He's the rottenest kind of a liar alive."

Old Dan smiled again. His shoulders came back.

"That settles it," he said.

BUT it didn't settle it. Bob kept wondering where all this would lead, with folks talking, with McDade coming back, with himself a coward. . . .

Evening came, and Bob went down the street. As he passed an alleyway, he heard a voice coming from a half-open window down there in the darkness. He heard the name of McDade. He heard the name of Bill Matthews. He stopped in the darkness, listening.

"I went in the office to see Dan," the voice said. "And there it was on the desk—a letter from McDade. It said that Bill Matthews was a yellow skunk, that he crawled and begged and whimpered when McDade run into him. McDade said Bill didn't fire a shot, and that he was comin' back up this way to. . . ."

Bob Matthews stole out of the alley again. Weighted by dread that this would reach the ears of Dan, he went back up to the office. Someone was already spreading the news—the news that would crumple old Dan's pride. Dan would fight back at them. He'd call them the dirty liars he thought they were. But he'd lose the fight. Bob Matthews knew that.

And Bob watched him lose the fight. With his heart heavy as lead, with pity and hopeless knowledge that he could not help, tearing at him, Bob watched the sag grow more pronounced in Dan Matthews' shoulders. He watched for the smile that should come to Dan's lips after he had visited Bill's grave. But the smile didn't come now. There was just that stern set to the old man's jaw; just that old, dogged determination that had always been there. And back of it was a haunted expression as folks would whisper, as somebody would stop and talk to him, and say, "Heard you got a letter from McDade."

Dan wouldn't answer them. He'd leave

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them, and try to hold his head up. He'd sit by the office window and stare out into the hills, from which, some day, McDade might come. He'd venture out into the street only when he had to. Bob hated to see him go out, because every time he did he'd come back with that hellish, haunted expression in his eyes.

It was dusk, and old Dan Matthews was coming up the street again. He plodded doggedly along, as though he was tired, as though the weight of the years rode him heavily. A rider was coming into town. He was coming fast, and he stopped in a cloud of dust as he came to where Dan Matthews walked up the street. He yelled at Dan, and Dan stopped dead still in his tracks at what he heard.

"McDade!" the fellow shouted. "He's over in the Wild Horse hills again. He robbed Lew Bredlow at his placer mine, and left Lew for dead. But Lew wasn't dead when I found him. He recognized McDade. He—"

Dan was running up the street now. He raced into the office and grabbed a rifle from the gun rack. His eyes burned feverishly as he turned, started out again, waving for Bob to come. They leaped into their saddles and stopped at the saloon, and old Dan Matthews called for a posse. But the men there were not enthusiastic, these gents who had called Bill and Bob Matthews yellow. They had seen an evidence of McDade's work. They took their time, and Dan Matthews lashed at them with cold ferocity in his voice. He cursed them for their slowness as they crawled into their saddles. He kept looking out toward the peaks, with that fire-filled longing in his sunken eyes, as he waited for the posse to form.

"At last, Bob!" he said softly. "At last we'll meet him again! At last we'll show 'em. We'll teach 'em that all the Matthews are men. You—and me—"

How ironic that seemed to Bob Matthews. Face to face with death again he would be if they met McDade. . . . Face to face with the thing he feared, the thing he knew would crack him, as it had cracked Bill Matthews!

Bob said nothing. He pranced his horse about, so old Dan could not look squarely at him. He felt that old fluttering coldness inside him, the thing that made his heart race, that tightened that band about his head, to squeeze his brain.

Then Dan Matthews' voice bellowed out an order. The posse surged ahead. They galloped out onto the plain and headed into the hills. They raced along, with Dan forcing a furious pace, slashing relentlessly on toward what seemed to Bob Matthews like death. . . .

BOB was cold, dazed, as they rode along. Death . . . Death . . . Like an ominous, repulsive thing, the thought rang in his mind. One minute he'd be alive. The next minute he'd be dead. Like Bill. . . .

They climbed into the hills, and the sharp echoes reminded him of those echoes he had heard before Bill had died. The shadows that reached out to clutch them reminded him of the shadows that had been in the ravine that other time. The posse stopped, and the silence was deep. Old Dan spoke, and his voice was filled with the same fire that burned in his eyes.

"If McDade's in the basin," he said, "there's only one way he can get out, and that's through White Horse Pass. We made a mistake before, by trying to catch him, instead of blocking him in. But now we can out him between two fires. If we close the pass, we got him bottled. He's probably got some men with him, so we'll need most of the posse to range for him. But one man can stop him at the pass. One man can hold him there till the rest of us arrive. It'll be a risky job. I want a volunteer."

Nobody spoke. The men stirred un-

easily. Bob Matthews tried to speak, but he couldn't say a word. Dan ran his eyes over the group of them, and a slight smile of disdain curled his lips.

"Bob," he said suddenly, "it looks as though the sheep have been howlin' at the wolves. Go up to White Horse Pass and stop McDade. Show 'em how a Matthews does his job."

All of a sudden it came to Bob Matthews that old Dan had not expected him to volunteer. He hadn't expected him to, because he thought that Bob was willing to go, would obey orders without a question. And just as suddenly, it came to Bob that here was a means of escape from all this. Here was his chance to get away, so that old Dan would not see him cave. If McDade had come in through White Horse Pass, there would be no danger for Bob Matthews if he too went through it, going the other way. He could escape by the same route that had brought McDade in.

Without a word, Bob Matthews turned his horse and rode away. With a rumble of hoofs, the posse speared away to round up McDade. Bob rode swiftly, steering clear of the trails. A hundred turbulent memories raced through his mind as he hit the hills, climbed into the narrow pass through which McDade would have to come to escape from the Wild Horse Hills again. Bob thought of the things old Dan had done, the things he'd said. . . . Go show 'em how a Matthews does his job! Bob Matthews was showing them by running away!

How would it feel to stand up and die, like old Dan would stand up and die? Could a man who was cursed with fear ever conquer that damnable thing? Could Bob force himself to stay, here in the pass, when McDade and his men were coming? And if he did stay, would he crawl? Would he run, if he kept thinking of all the swell things Dan had done for him? A blush of shame came to Bob's face as he knew he would run. Nothing on earth could keep him from it.

THE narrow pass was still. It was dark. Bob dismounted and climbed up into the rocks, to look down on the plain. He wanted to be sure that McDade was there, that McDade had really come through the pass. He saw the posse, still off on the flats, tiny dancing dots in the silver light of the moon. He looked off across the hills, but could see no other body of horsemen. Perhaps McDade had not yet come through. Maybe it would be dangerous to go on until he knew. . . .

He watched the posse for a while, then saw a lone rider branch out from it. The rider was Dan Matthews. Bob could recognize the pinto bronc he rode. Dan was weaving an irregular course toward the pass, cutting for sign. Dan had the same hunch that Bob Matthews had. Perhaps McDade was not yet here.

Bob climbed down. He went through the narrow gorge, and climbed the rocks at its other end. As he looked down, he saw a group of black dots coming speedily up the trail. There was McDade, and he was coming toward the Wild Horse Hills, not trying to leave them.

Wild fear pushing him, Bob Matthews scrambled down again and went into the darkness of the pass. As he stopped, he thought of old Dan, of the things that old Dan had said. . . . "Show 'em how a Matthews does his job!"

Bob Matthews tried to force himself to run away. But he couldn't. He tried to go on down the pass, to get his horse and ride down past Dan Matthews. He tried his damnedest to run, and not to give a damn if old Dan knew he was a coward. He cursed himself for a fool for caring whether Dan knew or not.

He thought of hiding in the rocks and letting McDade go on through. Then he thought of Dan, down there alone. Dan would fight McDade and his gang at the

drop of a hat. Dan Matthews, the four-square gent who had given Bob everything he had, everything he ever hoped to have, would die unless Bob died. . . .

A bitter smile came to Bob's lips as he thought of that. He told himself he wouldn't run. He'd stay. He'd try to be worthy of the name old Dan had given him. But he knew he couldn't. He'd crack at the first shot. He'd run like a rabbit at the whistle of a bullet.

He cursed suddenly, there in the shadows. He whipped the handcuffs off his belt and snapped one circle of steel about his wrist. He looked at the mesquite bush beside him, and cursed as he snapped the other end to the bush. He stood there for a moment, his mind frozen by what he'd done. Intentionally, deliberately, Bob had chained himself, made it so he *couldn't* run away. Now he *had* to fight.

Sudden realization of what he had done shook Bob. His knees trembled. A cold sweat drenched him. His heart leapt at his throat, violently fluttered and pounded in his breast. The click of horse's hoofs came loudly from down the canyon. McDade was coming!

WHAT a fool he'd been! What did he care for Dan Matthews? All that mattered was life! And he had thrown his life away!

Five dark forms came into the gray end of the canyon. They popped into view like five black pictures suddenly flashed on a screen. They seemed to hang there while Bob Matthews caught his breath. It was as if he was looking into eternity, for there was death, there in those five riders. They reined in, waited cautiously for a moment, listening.

A sudden frenzy of fear made Bob Matthews' hand dive for the key to those cuffs about his wrist. He fumbled for it. His breath came fast. The chain rattled.

A gun flamed from one of the riders' hands, and the key dropped to the ground. Another shot licked out. Bob straightened. His gun came up. The fire of it licked out. The crash of it boomed like thunder, rolling away in shuddering echoes in the hills. The flame of guns leaped out at him. Bullets whispered past his ears. A sharp pain struck his side. A million stars exploded in his brain. He was dazed. But he did not fall, because he could not fall. He was supported by that ring of steel, the thing that chained him to death!

Fresh blood ran down his face and into his lips. He tasted it, and spat. He blinked it from his eyes. As he fired again, he saw McDade waver in his saddle. That pain in his side was numb now. The four others behind McDade were crowding forward. Their guns were flaming, and some of their bullets hit Bob Matthews. He knew he was being hit, and wondered why he did not scream with pain, with the fear that should be within him. But, strangely, there was little pain. Strangely, there was little fear.

Suddenly Bob Matthews realized that it wasn't hard to face death. Pain was nothing. Bullets didn't burn like he'd thought they'd burn. Death wasn't as cold and horrible as he had thought it would be. Somehow now, it was exhilarating. Somehow, it was swell as hell to know that Dan Matthews would be able to smile again, that after this was over he'd have two stones at the heads of two graves. And on both of them would be the words that would make old Dan Matthews hold his head up high, words to make him proud:

A BRAVE MAN WHO DIED DOING HIS DUTY.

Those words burned in Bob Matthews' mind. His gun was emptied, and he reached around to get his other. He felt weakness surge up, and he fought it off. As he thought of how he had feared McDade, he laughed. He laughed aloud. McDade was dead. McDade was a huge

hulk of lifeless clay there in front of Bob Matthews' eyes! Another of them was down. Another bullet burned like hell for a moment, as it passed through Bob Matthews' leg. Then the burning passed and the leg was numb, as the rest of him seemed numb.

There were only two guns blazing at him . . . Then one . . . Then none. Bob Matthews hung limply on the end of the steel handcuffs, and listened to the frantic pound of hoofs that thundered toward the pass. Old Dan was coming. The posse was coming . . . . He had showed 'em how a Matthews does his job.

In the darkness, Bob Matthews reached down and found the handcuff key on the ground. He reached up and unlocked the cuff from about the bush stem. He fell to the ground, then turned the lock on the other cuff. He sank down and weakly pushed the handcuffs away, behind a rock, as old Dan Matthews thundered into the pass. He opened his eyes and looked up as Dan stopped beside him. He closed his eyes and felt the old gent's arms about him. He listened to the posse race into the pass and stop.

"McDade is a dirty liar," said Bob Matthews, his eyes still closed.

"We know he's a dirty liar," somebody said. "I guess a lot of us have been dirty liars, Bob."

Bob Matthews smiled as he heard that, as he heard the contrition in that voice. That was swell. There'd be two graves now, both with the same words on them. Two brave sons! Old Dan could be proud as hell. Bob opened his eyes and he saw Dan still kneeling there beside him, his hands clutching him, as though the old man was trying to keep Bob from slipping away from him. There was that stricken look on the old man's face, like he'd lost everything. It hit Bob that old Dan would be left all alone if he died. All of a sudden, Bob wondered if he could keep on living if he just gritted his teeth and hung on like hell; like those circlets of steel about the tree had made him hang on.

"We'll make a stretcher, and mebby we can make it into town," said somebody.

"We won't make anything," said old Dan, "except a shelter right here. We'll make a bed and put him on it. We'll keep a shelter over him till he's able to be moved. We'll bring a doctor out here."

Then there was the thunder of hoofs again. Dan Matthews was still holding onto Bob, as if he wouldn't ever let him go. Maybe, with everybody raising so much hell about trying to get him well, he wouldn't die, at that. As Bob looked at old Dan and saw that stubborn set to his jaw, he grinned, for he could feel the same muscle-tightened stubbornness in his own jaw now. He knew damned well he wouldn't die.

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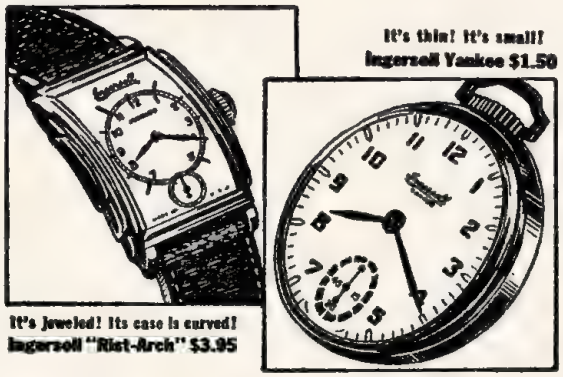

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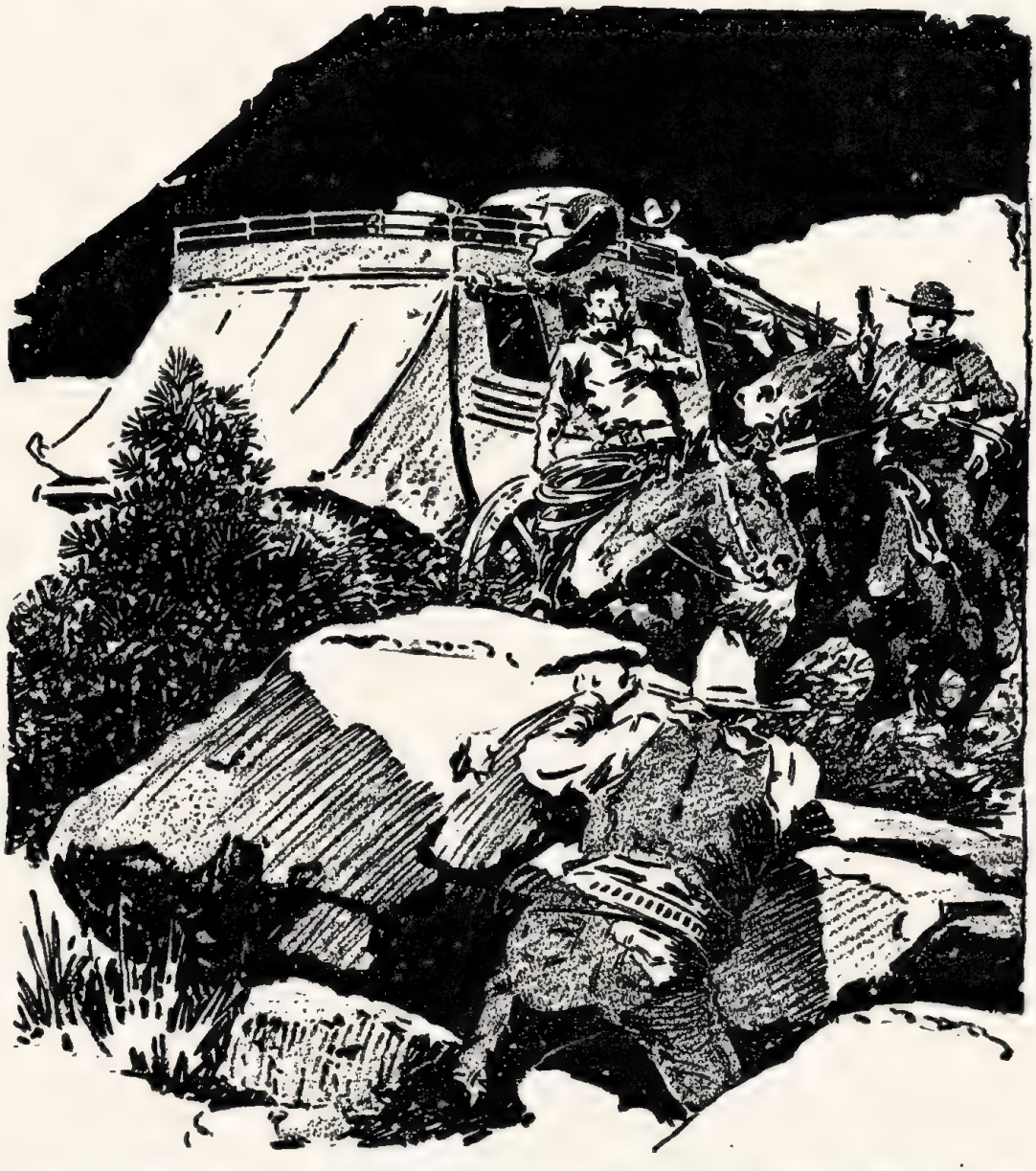

A novelette of a gunsmoke fugitive who carved his own fighting destiny

HE HAD staked his horse over on the far side of the hill, well out of hearing, and now, a hundred yards below the crest, he paused to take off his boots. When he moved ahead again, slowly, soundlessly, he kept to the cover of the cedars and carried a boot under each arm. He was tall and thin and had a gaunt face, so that his deliberate stealthy stalking made him look ungainly and a little ridiculous.

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Suddenly the man below stirred and rolled quickly onto his back. His two hands came alive and swivelled to the twin holsters at his thighs and streaked up a pair of Colts, lining them at Slim. The whole action left a second uncrowded and startled Slim so that his boots slipped from his grasp and thudded to the ground. His mouth gaped open in sheer fright, he swallowed thickly, and called out:

"Don't, Mark! It's only me. Swing them cutters away!"

The man called Mark sat up finally and pushed his weapons back into leather. He cursed softly, and with that his lean face lost its bleakness and the tautness went out of his flat, wide frame.

He shook his head soberly, and drawled: "Some day you'll prank yourself into a pack o' trouble, Slim."

"You're spooky, friend," was Slim's retort as he came on down to sit beside Mark and pull his boots back on. "How the hell did you know I was up there? I was movin' like a whisper."

He finished with the boots and waited for a reply. When it didn't come, he went on: "Everything's set. I got the whole story in town, like you told me to. Jake drifted in three days ago and went to the bank and paid up your back taxes. They got word to the sheriff some way and he nabbed Jake as he was leavin' the bank and took him down to the jail. They say he kept him there for an hour, tryin' to pump him about where to find you. But Jake kept his mouth shut and sloped out of town that night. It means he's down there at the house now, waitin' for us."

Mark's glance shuttled to the spread below once more. The buildings had a rundown look. The poles of the corral were down on one side, and weeds grew in the hard-packed yards in front of the house. "But he isn't down there," Mark said. "There hasn't been sign of a livin' thing all afternoon."

"There's plenty of talk in town about you," Slim went on, his thoughts uninterrupted by what Mark had told him. "The day after Jake pulled out, a jasper turned up with the news he'd seen you on the Powder Creek trail, headin' this way. So the sheriff and a posse spent all day yesterday combin' the hills to the west, tryin' to get a line on where you'd gone. And a gent named Tolliver put up another thousand for you, dead or alive."

"Ralph Tolliver!" Mark snapped, his gray eyes widening a trifle in surprise. "I thought Ralph was my friend."

Slim shook his head. "Think again. They say he's the one who was goin' to buy your outfit if the taxes hadn't been paid. Wants a new home for his bride. He's marryin' the sister of the gent you beefed that night. Not that I think you did it, understand, but they—"

Mark's hand streaked out to clamp a vice-like grip on Slim's arm. "Say that again, Slim!"

"Ralph Tolliver's marryin' the Sanderson girl," Slim pulled his arm away and rubbed it gingerly. "Why, does that change things?"

Mark shook his heard, yet the look in his eyes belied his denial.

"I didn't know," Slim muttered, in half-apology.

THEY sat in silence a long while, then Slim got to his feet and looked off to the west toward the low-lying foothills. "You was right, Mark. The town's gone hog-wild. It's full of ore-wagons and drummers and gamblers and loose women. Wide open! Four new saloons in the last two weeks. And all because of that." He waved a hand, indicating several new and unpainted shacks that dotted the slopes to the west, toward town. Below each shack was the fan-spread scar of a muck-dump. "There's more yellow metal comin' out of these hills than any man has seen since Deadwood. And your place

here is bound to be worth a mint o' money."

"Maybe," said Mark, skeptically.

Another silence held them for long minutes. Finally it was Slim who broke it, saying impatiently, "Let's get down to the house. I'd like a square meal for a change. Jake must have stocked up on food, knowin' we'd be here today."

"We'll wait until after dark," Mark told him. He looked down at the buildings with a worried frown furrowing his high forehead. "I don't like the looks of it, Slim. Not a-tall."

Slim grumbled at this but sat down again and built himself a cigarette. Abruptly he queried:

"What're you back here for, Mark? You know what it'll mean. Nobody knows any better now that you were framed than they did three years ago, when you took out two minutes ahead of that lynch mob. Sanderson was dry-gulched, an' they found your gun alongside his body. That's all they know, an' you ain't goin' to be able to tell 'em different any more."

It was a full ten seconds before he got his answer. "Take a look to the south," Mark said finally. "See the break off there, where the grass meets the bad lands? My range runs all the way to that line. And west, to where that dry-wash cuts across from the foothills. Two miles in back of us is my north fence, and the grass runs knee-deep for better than three miles to the east before you hit that border." He paused and turned to Slim, and then concluded. "It's four thousand acres, boy, good acres, and I think it's worth fightin' for."

Slim nodded; "I reckon it is. But who are you going to fight?"

"I don't know yet. But I'll never get anywhere ridin' the dark trails a hundred, two hundred miles away. Maybe if I poke around here awhile I'll bump into something."

"Maybe something'll bump into you," Slim corrected. It was a rare thing for him to hear Mark utter so many words at one time, and to speak so heatedly.

"That's my lookout," Mark grunted. "You and Jake will be safer here than any other place. You're wanted in Idaho, Jake's wanted in New Mexico. Stick with me and we may have the chance to grow old together here at my layout. If that doesn't suit, both of you can ride any time you feel like it."

"It ain't my hide I'm thinkin' of," Slim complained. "It's yours, partner. I'd hate to see that bounty paid on you."

"I'll do the worryin'."

That concluded their discussion. They watched the sun's red disk slip below the far, flat horizon and tinge the snow-fields on the peaks to the right a coral hue, broken here and there by the bright emerald of some high hill pasture. Mark's eyes were chiefly for the layout below; he looked down at it as though fascinated, as if in seeing it once again he was satisfying some age-long hunger. Yet his frown deepened as the quick dusk settled and hid the buildings in shadow. He was worried at not seeing any sign of Jake, who should have been waiting for them.

Finally, when the full darkness had come on, he said: "We'll give it a try now"

CHAPTER TWO

Gunsmoke Homecoming

THE descent was steep. Because they chose to move quietly, they took a full half hour to reach the valley floor. They approached the layout from the corral side, and, as the shadowed skeleton of the enclosure came up out of the darkness, Mark took Slim by the arm, pulled him close and said in a low voice: "The house is straight ahead. In five minutes you head for it with your gun out. I'm circlin' to come in from the front. If

Jake was there we'd have seen him long before this."

He was gone into the night before Slim could give an answer. This was old, familiar ground, and Mark circled to the front of the house with the certainty of a man who knows well what he is doing. Once there, among the cottonwoods that edged the wide yard, he paused long enough to lift the six-gun from his right holster.

He was within ten yards of the house when he saw the dim outline of a man's bulky form edge suddenly around the near corner.

"Jake?" he called softly.

He had his reply in a thundering, flame-lancing gun-blast. It lit the darkness for a split-second to show him an unfamiliar face peering intently across at him. With that flash of light came a slamming blow at his left shoulder; it spun him part way around and threw him off balance. He dug his heels into the solid ground and brought his gun around and thumbed an answering shot. And then he heard Slim's shouting out behind, and caught sight of his friend running across the yard toward him.

He was about to voice a warning to Slim when he saw the man's outline ahead of him lurch forward and sprawl to the ground. Slim came up an instant later, muttered an oath, and knelt beside the prostrate form. Mark saw him reach out and wrench the gun from the man's outstretched, lifeless hand, and then heard him call out: "You hurt?"

"Take care of him while I have a look inside," was Mark's answer. He was reassured by the absence of any other unfamiliar sound. It took him five seconds to reach the back door of the house and to try the knob, and to find it locked. With one thrusting kick he broke open the door and stepped quickly inside. The darkness was unrelieved here, and for a moment Mark stood debating what to do next. Then he remembered a trick his father had taught him, and reached into the pocket of his shirt and brought out a match.

His left shoulder was stiff and aching; he found that out when he changed his heavy .45 from right hand to left. But he could use the hand, and he held the gun steadily before him and palmed the match in his right hand, then hurled it far out across the floor.

In the sudden flare he made out a figure in a chair across the room and instantly recognized Jake. He crossed over and quickly pulled the gag out of Jake's mouth. "The gent I just plugged outside, the only one around?" he asked brusquely.

"He's the only one," was Jake's croaking answer. "Get these ropes off me, will you?"

REASSURED, Mark struck another match and lit the lamp he found on the table alongside the door. As the yellow flush of the lamp-glow cut the gloom he returned to his friend. Jake's thickset frame was tied securely in a straight-backed chair. The livid line of a bruise ran across his forehead, while above it showed a smear of hair-matted blood.

Mark took out his knife and cut Jake loose. It took all his strength, for now his shoulder throbbed in pain and his sleeve was wet with blood. He turned away so that Jake wouldn't see and asked in a level voice: "What happened?"

Jake got stiffly out of his chair and staggered across to the table and lifted a dipperful of water from the pail standing there. He emptied the dipper in three hasty gulps.

Suddenly Jake heard a soft thud behind him and turned in time to see Mark roll over onto his back, his face shades lighter than its usual tan.

"Slim!" he bellowed in alarm. "Get in here!"

Then, hearing Slim's steps come pounding around the far end of the cabin, Jake dipped more water and threw it in Mark's face. Mark stirred, groaned softly, and opened his eyes.

Slim rushed in at the door, his six-gun in his fist. He saw at a glance what had happened, and pushed Jake roughly to one side. "Anyone who'd give us the kind of a greetin' you did ought to be wearin' knee pants, brother," he growled. "Step aside and let me handle this."

Mark tried to sit up, but Slim pushed him down again and ripped off his sleeve so that he could see the wound. "This calls for a sawbones," he said. "Stay where you are and we'll bring in the lad you plugged inside and make it a hospital." He took off his bandana, bound it around Mark's shoulder, and then said to Jake: "Let's fetch your friend."

Slim rose and led the way out. After a brief interval he and Jake reappeared, carrying between them the limp form of the man Mark had wounded. "He's got a thick head," Slim told Mark. "I'm sorry to say I think he may live."

At that moment, as the light from the lamp fell across the wounded man's face, Mark gave a gasp of surprise. "Harl Brender! Why was he here, Jake?"

"You know him?" Jake queried, unapprovingly. "He can't be your friend. Last night he was waitin' at the corral as I rode in. Gave me a pistol-whippin' before I knew what hit me. And today he kept me laced in that chair, laughin' every time I asked him for a drink. I reckon he thought he'd get it out of me where to find you."

"He always was forked," Mark said. "Three years ago he was roddin' the Whiplash outfit, over east. Later I heard that the bank foreclosed on the layout. Wonder why he's tryin' to mix in this?"

"You can wait for your answer," Slim told him, a worried frown on his face as he saw that his simple bandage had not stopped the flow of blood from Mark's shoulder. He turned to Jake. "You get some water boilin' on the stove and find a clean towel and put it in that hole in his shoulder. I'm headin' for town."

It did no good for Mark to protest. Five minutes later Slim pounded out from the corral astride Jake's chestnut mare. Mark had told him to get Doc Swain, and had also cautioned: "The old fool may not want to come. If he gets stubborn stick a gun in his ribs and tell him Mark Healy's in trouble."

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-toting Medico

CORNELIUS SWAIN, known to his best friends as "Cornie," to casual acquaintances as "Doc", was plainly worried. He sat on the bed in Ralph Tolliver's sparsely furnished hotel room and slowly turned the chewed butt of a cigar over and over between his thin lips. His slit-eyed glance was now focused on the man sitting in the chair across the room.

"It was a damn fool play, Tolliver!" he snapped. "We'll lose our shirts tonight if that stage doesn't get through."

Ralph Tolliver shifted uncomfortably and tilted his chair back against the wall. He was young and handsome, his face long and aquiline with a hint of weakness to the chin; but the hardness of his pale blue eyes took that weakness away. He made a striking figure, outfitted fashionably in gray frock-coat, white shirt and string-tie, and low-heeled fancy-stitched boots.

"No one will lose anything," he said, his tones suave and unruffled. "It was the only thing to do, Doc."

"The hell it was!" Swain snorted. "You got a two-ton safe in your store. All this talk about hard-cases bustin' in and carryin' that gold off is drivel! Instead

of leavin' it there for the two weeks until the new bank is finished, you make us load the sixty thousand onto a stage and run it down to Glenwood, with a damn good chance of losin' the whole shipment."

"Only four of us know what the stage is carryin' Doc," Tolliver said. "In two hours more it'll be safe in the vaults at Glenwood. I tell you, I didn't want the responsibility of havin' it in my store. Besides, our bank won't be finished in two weeks, maybe not in two months. You can't hire men to lay brick here now. They're all up in the hills at the diggin's."

"What if someone should hold up the stage?" Doc asked savagely.

"It's more likely they'd rob the safe in the store. Remember, Doc, Mark Healy and his wild bunch are on the loose around here."

Doc snorted his disgust and got up off the bed and crossed to the door, still chewing his cigar. There he turned and said levelly: "I'd expect to hear that from you, Ralph. You know damn well Mark Healy's no robber. And you know we ran a chance sendin' that gold down tonight. You could stand to lose your share and not miss it. I couldn't. Neither could a lot of others. Sanderson's one. He needs his gold to pay off the mortgage on the hotel here." He paused a moment, and a cunning light edged into his glance as he went on: "Are you really marryin' Sanderson's girl, Ralph, or is she changin' her mind now that they've hit that nice little vein up on their claim?"

Ralph Tolliver came up out of his chair in one lithe, quick surge of motion. In three steps he crossed the room to stand facing the medico. Swain stood his ground. "See here, sawbones," Tolliver breathed, his tone holding a strident menace. "Don't let that talk get around! Gail Sanderson loves me and that's why we're gettin' married."

"That so?" Doc said, unafraid, his shaggy brows raising in polite inquiry. "I'm glad I found that out. You see, I had the idea Gail kind of liked Mark Healy. Well, well," he went on, giving Tolliver no chance to interrupt. "That shows how wrong a man can be. I sure hope it's a good match. You've got my good wishes, Ralph."

HE STRETCHED out his hand in a devilishly affable gesture that caught the other off guard. Tolliver took the hand and mumbled an awkward, "Thanks," knowing as he did it that Swain had made his point. Yet he couldn't overlook one thing, and hastened to add: "You're all wrong about Gail and Mark Healy, Doc. After all, he killed Joe Sanderson. How could she still like him?"

Doc shrugged and said silkily: "O' course she couldn't. Forget I mentioned it." He turned and went out the door and closed it behind him.

On his way down the stairs to the lobby there was a satisfied twinkle in his rheumy old eyes. Swain had reached the paunchy age; he was thirty pounds heavier than five years ago and he moved deliberately these days. He came down the stairs slowly, his glance searching out a girl who stood behind the small desk in the lobby.

This was Gail Sanderson, who helped her father at the desk evenings now that the town was crowded and every room in the hotel filled. She smiled as she saw Swain coming toward her.

"You folks are sure on easy street now," he said, pausing at the desk. "Maybe you'll be buildin' an addition to the place this winter?"

"You're joking, Cornie," Gail answered. Her strong, pretty face took on a more serious expression then, and a troubled look crept into her brown eyes as she asked in a low voice: "Do you think the stage will get through all right?"

"It will if Mark Healy and his gang

don't stick it up," Doc said. His face had taken on a set inscrutability as he studied the girl's reaction to this sudden thrust.

Her face colored deeply, and an angry light flared into her glance. "Doc!" she said, addressing him by his more formal name. "How can you say a thing like that? Mark Healy would never steal!"

Swain's face took on a relieved smile. "I know he wouldn't," he hastened to say. Then he added: "That's what I told Tolliver. He said some awful things about Mark."

Again he saw that anger edge into her glance. But this time it was different. She was proudly defiant now, in a way that made her very beautiful, and she said: "Ralph Tolliver and I don't agree on a few things. That's one of them."

Swain chuckled softly and told her: "Keep thinkin' that way about Mark, girl. You're liable to see him again one of these days." And with that he sauntered out the door, leaving Gail with a half-embarrassed yet pleased tide of color mounting to her cheeks.

Swain whistled on the way to his office, which lay beyond the crowded business district. He avoided this part of town lately, hating the things that had changed its main street from a placid narrow lane to a moiling, crowded thoroughfare. There was some consolation in the fact that his small claim was paying him big dividends in the short hours he could spare to work it; yet Doc Swain had never had need of money and he would gladly have done without it to bring back the old, quiet days.

He turned in at the walk that led to his small house, climbed the porch steps and opened the door, grumbling at his carelessness in having forgotten to turn out his lamp. Then he saw the tall man standing there with a levelled sixgun in his hand and he pushed the door shut behind him and said calmly: "What kind of a 'Howdy' is that, stranger?"

Slim jerked the snout of his weapon to one side to indicate the cabinet full of shining instruments that stood against the far wall, drawling flatly: "Gather up your things and come with me, Doc. There's a man hurt bad."

Swain's glance became quizzical, almost polite. He chose to ignore the menacing gun and said, "Anyone I know?"

"Grab your bag and lay off the questions," was Slim's brusque rejoinder. He was nervous tonight, worried about Mark, and his temper was short. "You'll see who it is quick enough. I saddled your jug-head. He's waitin' out back with mine."

Swain crossed to his desk and got his black bag. Then he looked pointedly at Slim's gun and said: "Is it necessary for you to keep that thing in your hand, friend?"

Slim said: "No, I reckon I don't," and dropped his weapon into the holster at his thigh. Doc nodded and turned to the glass-fronted case behind him and opened the door and took out several instruments. Then he came back to the desk and opened his case and put the instruments into it; and when his hand came out again it held a short, double-barreled derringer.

"Now talk!" he breathed. "Tell me who it is and where you're takin' me! I might want to drop you off at the jail before makin' my call!"

SLIM gulped in amazement and his hand started to reach down for his gun. But at that moment he distinctly heard the hammer-clack of the derringer as Swain cocked it. He hesitated, and then managed to get out: "We wouldn't hurt you, Doc. It's one gent with a hole through his shoulder and another with a busted head. You see they got into an argument and—"

"Who are they? Where are they?" Swain snapped out, his weapon still centered on Slim's belt-buckle.

Slim hesitated in answering, his jaw suddenly cording in stubborn resolve to keep his secret. But Swain's unblinking gaze and the threat of that wicked little derringer was too much. "It's Mark Healy," Slim blurted out. "He's hurt bad with a slug in his shoulder. The other's—"

"Who gives a damn about the other one!" Swain roared. "Why didn't you tell me it was Mark?" He dropped the derringer into his bag, snapped it shut, and came from behind his desk in a hurry. "Well, what're you waitin' for, High-Pockets? Let's be goin'!"

Slim swallowed his amazement and led the way out back, to where two horses stood tied to the top pole of Swain's small corral. They got up into their saddles and Slim led the way. But soon Doc put his horse into a swinging run that took him past Slim, and from there on the tall one had all he could do to keep the sawbones in sight.

The brevity of Doc Swain's greeting had been eloquent. A warm light had softened his glance as he crossed the room to take Mark's hand in a firm, sure grasp. "This does me good, Mark," he had said. And then, without one wasted motion, he had dressed Mark's wound, mumbling gruffly as he finished: "Nothin' but a hole. No bones broken, and it's clean. Show me this other gent."

He had paid scant attention to the unmoving figure on the floor in the darkened corner of the room. But now he stepped over and looked down at the man, and the other three distinctly heard his quickly indrawn breath. "Harl Brender!" he gasped, and then whirled quickly to face Mark. "What's Harl doin' here?"

Mark told him, briefly, and ended by saying: "Maybe you can help us, Cornie. Why would Harl be forted up here waitin' his chance to get me?"

"It's Tolliver!" Swain muttered, cursing softly with a pent-up rage that surprised the others. "Harl's still with his old outfit, the Whiplash. But now it belongs to Ralph Tolliver. Ralph bought up the mortgage from the bank when they foreclosed. It was him that started this rush for gold. He found the yellow metal up in the hills on the Whiplash range. He and Harl are as thick as blood brothers. This looks bad, Mark."

"Meanin' that it's Tolliver who's after my scalp?"

"Just that. Tolliver must have had a hunch you'd head for the home place after you'd been seen up the Powder Creek trail the other day. Nothin' would please him better than to collect his own bounty on you. It's Gail that's got him worried, Mark. She still thinks a lot of you."

Mark was silent for a moment, a new, strange light coming into his eyes. And in the awkward silence that followed each one of them was busy with his own thoughts, trying to digest this unlooked-for news. Harl Brender lay without moving, breathing thickly, his round, ugly face a sickly yellow under the lamplight.

It was Swain who broke the silence to say: "There's only one way of ever findin' out what's behind this. Harl's been out cold since your bullet creased his scalp. He may be out for another six hours, or he may come to any minute now. He isn't hurt bad, but that bullet gave his brain a terrific wallop. Slight concussion, I'd call it." He knelt to examine Brender's wound more closely. At length, he straightened up and looked at Mark and went on: "Harl won't know what's happened to him. He probably doesn't even know who he shot at out there in the dark. You gents had better lay him back out there, put his gun in his hand, and let him wake up when he feels like it and try and guess what's happened. I won't even put a bandage on his head. The wound's clean and the air'll do it good."

"And what about us?" Mark said. "I came back here to prove I didn't beef Joe Sanderson, Cornie. And I'm not leavin' until I do."

Swain was thoughtful a moment. "It's a cinch you can't stay here," he muttered. Abruptly he looked up and said: "I've got it. The three of you can hole up in my shack at the claim. Tomorrow I'll drive up there in the buggy and bring you some grub. Maybe some news. Now let's get this whippoorwill moved out of here before he comes out of it."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunman's Master

SWAIN was impatient to get back to town. Strangely enough, his first thought had been that he would have to share his secret with Gail Sanderson. But as he weighed this idea more soberly, he knew that the happiness it would give her to know about Mark might in the end become a bitterness. "Better wait until he's in the clear," he told himself.

As he was coming in from the stable he heard the rumble of iron-tired wheels pounding up the trail toward the edge of town. Seconds later he saw a lumbering stage-coach pass down the darkened street out front and instantly recognized it as the one that had started for Glenwood earlier that evening.

"What're they doin' back so soon?" he asked himself, and went around the corner of his house and onto the street. Looking down its narrow length, he saw that the stage had pulled up in front of Tolliver's hardware store, far up the street, and that a crowd was forming around it. A sudden foreboding told Swain that there had been trouble.

Once inside the store he caught Ralph Tolliver's eye and went with him behind one of the counters, out of hearing of the others. "What happened?" he asked.

Tolliver's handsome countenance wore a worried frown. "Holdup," was his terse answer. "Mark Healy and his wild bunch! Britt Hardy and the others fought 'em off but didn't think it was safe to go on. So they turned around and brought the stage back. Hell, Doc, this means serious trouble! What did I tell you about—"

Tolliver broke off as he looked toward the front doors and saw Gail Sanderson step into the long room. The next moment she spied them, and as she approached her eyes blazed defiantly. She came to stand directly before Tolliver, and to ask him levelly: "Are you going out there and stop that talk about Mark, Ralph?"

Tolliver cleared his throat nervously and replied: "How can I? Britt was drivin' and had a good look at Mark. I can't deny something that's true. They'd laugh at me."

"Britt Hardy didn't see Mark Healy," Gail said, her voice rising. "Mark would never steal. Britt lied!"

Tolliver flushed at this, yet he covered his confusion quickly and lifted his shoulders in a gesture of helplessness. Seeing that, Gail turned to Swain: "You know this isn't true. Why don't you do something about it?"

Knowing what he did, Doc Swain had a hard time disguising his feelings. It hurt him to tell her: "Gail, no amount of words can fix this now. Go on over to the hotel and get a good sleep and forget about it if you can. Tomorrow, we'll see what we can do."

The girl stared at her friend in disbelief. Swain had refused to defend Mark Healy for the first time, and it stunned Gail to realize it. Her look of defiance gradually gave way to one of wonder. Once she started to speak, then checked her words and turned away and went out onto the street.

Swain's glance followed her, and as

she disappeared through the doors he muttered: "This is goin' to be hard on her." Then, remembering Tolliver's presence, he added: "Take it easy with her, Ralph. She'll get over it and then you'll have your chance."

He sauntered out from behind the counter and followed the girl. The storeowner's face took on the hint of a smile as he watched the sawbone's retreating back; he hadn't hoped to convince these two so easily, particularly Swain.

Half an hour later Tolliver locked the store and went across to the hotel. The desk in the lobby was deserted as he went in and climbed the stairs to his room. A satisfied smile took control of his features once his door was closed.

He wasn't ready to sleep yet so he lit a cigar and sat down in the rocker alongside his bed, calmly cataloguing the incidents of the evening. Britt Hardy had given a pretty persuasive account of the attempted holdup; he'd even shown the crowd three bullet-holes through the back of his seat.

TOLLIVER'S cigar had become a three-inch butt when the knock sounded at his door. It brought him out of his chair in a hurried lunge. Then he smiled thinly at his nervousness and reached over to turn down the lamp. He took a short-barreled .38 from his shoulder holster and held it in his left hand as he inched open the door and looked out into the dimly lit hall.

It was Harl Brender. Tolliver swung the door open, and, seeing the crude bandage showing from under the man's Stetson growled irritably: "Get in!" When Brender had entered, Tolliver closed the door behind him, gave his hireling a scornful look, and said: "Let's have it."

Brender swallowed with difficulty, seeing the look in Tolliver's eye. "He got away," he muttered, submissively.

Brender had expected an outburst, but not what came. For Tolliver's blue eyes smeared over in a look of open rage and he said: "At times I think I could get along without you, Harl. This is one of the times."

Brender's blanched face lost another shade. "How the hell could I help it?" he flared. But Tolliver's glance quickly killed his belligerence and he went on more mildly: "I did the best I could, Boss. I swear it! I found that jasper we spotted in town the other day and had him hog-tied and gagged in the house out there tonight when this Mark Healy came driftin' in. I let him have it, not twenty feet off, and I saw my slug take him. But some damn fool luck let him get in a shot at me. It did this." He took off his Stetson and ripped his bandana away and showed Tolliver the open wound on his scalp. "I was out for three hours. When I come to there wasn't a livin' soul around."

Tolliver paced up and down the short length of his room, and Harl Brender's color, meanwhile, was not improving. He watched Tolliver with a harried, hawk-like glance, and as the moments dragged by he let his hand edge to within finger-span of his six-gun. Finally Tolliver stopped his pacing and turned to Brender and saw the man's uncertain, wary gesture. He laughed softly, and said: "You'd never get away with it, Harl! Once I'm dead the rest of you stand a good chance of swingin' from a rope. There's a bundle of papers over in my safe that'll put every law man in Arizona on your trail! Yours and Britt's!"

He paused, watching the effect of his words on Brender, whose two hands came away from his guns and opened and closed nervously. "That's better," Tolliver murmured, chuckling softly. Abruptly, his face went serious again and he continued: "I'll forget what you did tonight, Harl. Only don't slip the next time. Tomorrow

night that stage heads for Glenwood with the gold again. Britt will be drivin'. You and Jerry and Tip will be waitin' at Miller's Ford. This time I want it played right. That's all."

"Sure, Boss!" Harl said, immediately relieved. "I won't never do this wrong—"

"That's all," Tolliver cut in. "You can go now."

Brender meekly turned and went to the door. There he hesitated, about to say something; but in the end he thought better of it and opened the door and quietly disappeared into the dark hallway.

CHAPTER FIVE

Exile's Powdersmoke Reckoning

IT WAS dusk when Doc Swain drove his buggy up to his shack at the diggin's above town the next evening. A close observer would have wondered at the Doc's unloading so many supplies from the compartment behind the buggy's seat. But up here men sweat at their own work with feverish activity and had little time for other people's business, so that Doc carried his bundles into the shack without arousing any suspicion. Once the task was finished he closed the door, drew the burlap sacking across the windows, and lighted the lamp on the small slab table.

"That's better," Slim said, once the lamplight cut the shadows. "I was thinkin' we'd have to fumble around in the dark."

Swain took a look at Mark's shoulder, pronounced it better, and then helped Slim cook the meal. As they finished eating Swain began his story of the happenings of the previous night, and Mark and Slim and Jake listened without once interrupting. When the sawbones had finished, Mark took out his tobacco and papers and rolled a cigarette, using his left hand a little awkwardly because of the sling.

"So Tolliver won't let you keep the gold in his safe another day," Mark mused. "And Britt is drivin' tonight again and another of Tolliver's men is ridin' guard along with a man that Sanderson's sendin' along. And everyone in the country knows the stage is makin' the trip, which means that Mark Healy could get the word and make sure this time. Am I right, Cornie?"

"Right as hell. An' there's not one damned thing we can do about it!"

"There is something we can do about it," Mark drawled. Then, before Swain could interrupt: "The trail is fairly open for a mile out of town before she cuts down into the canyon. That's too close to town for anything to happen. Then for six and a half miles there isn't room enough to stand a burro alongside a stage hoggin' the right of way. But at Miller's Ford there's a quarter-mile straightaway with room on both sides. It'll happen right there, Cornie."

"Sure!" Swain snapped. "I've got it figured that far. They'll probably beef Stebbins, the gent Sanderson is sendin' along as shotgun-guard, first thing. Britt Hardy and the others will come draggin' home toward mornin', without their guns, and maybe with a few busted heads and some bruises, and we'll hear of how they fought and got licked and had to fork over the gold in the end. And that's all there'll be to it. Sanderson and I and all the rest lose every ounce of dust we've got to our names! And if we accuse Tolliver of the thing before it comes off he can laugh at us and make us look like fools. He's got the town by the tail!"

"Couldn't four good men stop Tolliver's play?" Mark asked quietly.

Swain's head jerked up, and his eyes narrowed as he caught the meaning behind Mark's words. "Meanin' me for the fourth?" He paused, considering. Then he got deliberately to his feet and said: "I've got a saddle in the shed out back. What're we waitin' for?"

BRITT HARDY let the reins go slack in his hands as the two teams took to the water, splashed across the ford and climbed the steep bank on the other side. He turned his head and glanced at Stebbins, who was riding the back boot, and then muttered to the man beside him: "Let him have it!"

His companion faced around, raised his shotgun, and pulled both triggers. In the flare of that double concussion, Stebbins' burly form jerked spasmodically, and he came to his feet screaming in pain. Then he doubled up and fell off the back of the coach to hit the ground hard and lie without moving a muscle.

"Nice work," commented Britt. "Harl and the boys are waitin' in the trees up ahead." Hardly had he finished speaking when three horsemen came out of the shadowed margins of the cedar belt that flanked the trail ahead. Britt recognized Brender, Jerry Hawkins and Tip Ruling.

But at that moment a rifle cracked ominously from the nearer margins of the trees, and the man beside Britt dropped his shotgun and clawed at his chest and fell sideways into Britt. Harl and his two companions wheeled their horses at the sound of the shot, and when the next brittle *crack* sounded, their six-guns blasted back an answering staccato.

Mark was the first to leave the cover of the cedars. He was bent low on the off-side of the saddle and his gelding streaked toward Harl and his two companions at a weaving run. In three seconds he was within range, and then his .45 spoke twice. Harl Brender sloped out of his saddle and hit the ground in a sprawling dive, with his right leg dragging stiff and useless behind him.

Slim followed Mark, riding in close and then throwing himself from the saddle to take shelter behind a huge boulder. Slim's first shot had sent Britt Hardy down off the seat in frantic haste, to take cover behind his drag team.

Now Britt was emptying his gun at the boulder. He was frantically shucking empty shells out of his weapon as Doc Swain galloped up, circled and brought him into view, throwing one flame-lancing shot at him. Britt snapped out of his crouch, an agonized scream breaking from his lips. He staggered toward Swain and then abruptly fell face down, unmoving.

It was over in one brief half-minute. Harl's two companions, seeing their leader down, threw away their guns and lifted their hands. Jake had been waiting ahead in the trail, ready to cut off any attempt at escape. Now he rode in, dismounted, and walked over to look down at Harl Bender. Something he saw made him kneel quickly and call out:

"Get over here quick, Doc!"

BRENDER opened his eyes a moment later and looked up at Jake, croaking hoarsely: "Water! Get me some water!"

Mark had a sudden thought that made him take Swain by the arm and lead him to one side as Jake went to the creek.

"We're just where we were last night," Mark said, his voice barely above a whisper. "We can't hang this on Ralph Tolliver yet. He can say his men sold him out, did the job on their own. Would a little plain lyin' to a dying man hurt any, Cornie?"

Swain shook his head. "Not if it gets us what we want."

"Then don't let Brender see you," Mark put in hastily. "It might spoil my play." Before Doc could get his meaning, he had sauntered over to stand alongside the wounded man again.

Brender looked up and recognized Mark with a show of surprise. "You, Healy?" he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I thought—"

"Ralph sold you out," Mark told him, levelly. "There's only three of us, meanin' a bigger split for him. He wanted to get rid of you anyway, Harl, after the way you

slipped on that job last night." Mark gave the lie calmly, and waited.

His words brought a visible change to Harl Brender's face. A moment ago all that had showed there was pain and fear. But now, as he took in what he had heard, his features twisted into ugliness. "You're lyin', Mark," he said without conviction.

Mark lifted his shoulders in a careless shrug. "Why should I have to lie? You're done for. Tolliver's rid of you."

"He'd never hire the man he framed!" Harl choked out, blood flecking his lips. "He'd never—" He broke off in a gasp for breath.

"He did, though," Mark said, pressing his point. "I'm to get an extra five hundred for puttin' you out of the way. What's this about him framin' someone?"

"You!" Harl whispered, a sudden flow of energy giving him the strength to speak. "He'll do the same with you as he has to me. Watch out for that sidewinder, Healy! He framed you before and he'll—He—he was the one who gut-shot Joe Sanderson. Your gun—the one they found beside Sanderson—Ralph paid me to steal it from your saddle-bag that night. Afterwards—when you went away—I—"

Brender's body suddenly went limp. Jake leaned over and felt of his wrist and stood up once again and slowly shook his head. Harl Brender was dead.

Mark looked over at Doc Swain and said softly: "You're a witness, Cornie. That's all I needed." Then he turned to Jake and said tersely: "You'll take the stage on into Glenwood, Jake. Slim can herd these other two back to town." And with that he walked to his horse and swung into the saddle and started back up the trail.

Slim growled something unintelligible and started to follow, but Swain stopped him. "Don't, High-Pockets! If he buys into trouble, I'd better be the one to help."

The sawbones walked over to his horse and mounted and set out after Mark at a stiff run. Slim watched until the sawbones had disappeared, and then took off his Stetson and hurled it to the ground at his feet: "And we're left standin' here! After comin' all this way!" Then he looked over at Harl Brender's two companions and drawled: "For two pesos I'd plant some lead in your skulls and go along with those two! How about it, Jake?"

Jake shook his head: "We'd be in the way. This gent forward knows what he's doin'. Come on, let's get this over with!"

Ten minutes later they were headed down the canyon, Jake at the stage's ribbons, Slim leading the way with the two gunnies tied into their saddles.

RALPH TOLLIVER leaned on the hotel counter and tried for the third time to get a response from Gail Sanderson: "It wasn't me that did it, Gail. Britt Hardy swore he saw Mark."

Gail sat behind the small table at the rear of the counter. Just now she looked up at Tolliver and said, icily: "I've told you I don't care to discuss Mark. And if you know—" Her glance, running beyond Tolliver, took in Mark Healy's entrance, and her surprised gasp at what she saw warned Ralph, who turned slowly to face the door. Mark had stepped inside, and Swain stood two paces behind him.

"Harl Brender died a half hour ago," Mark said, his gaze riveted on the storeowner. "He talked before he cashed in."

Tolliver's face lightened a shade in color. To cover his confusion, he snapped out: "There's three thousand on your head, Healy. Are you askin' someone to collect it?"

"I am," Mark said flatly. "Only you're wrong about it bein' three thousand on *my* head. It's on yours now. Harl told us how he got my gun that night, how you killed Joe Sanderson and how you framed it on me. Your time's up, Tolliver!"

Swain stepped beside Mark and put in: "He's right, Ralph. I heard every word. You'd better come along and see the sheriff and do your talkin' to him."

Tolliver's face took on a cunning smile. "I'll do that," he drawled. "It shouldn't be hard to make the sheriff listen to reason." His right hand raised to his coat lapel, and Mark, seeing that, let his hand fall to the butt of his Colt.

But Tolliver's hand dipped under his lapel and came out holding his big brown leather cigar-case. He leisurely took out a cigar, bit off the end, and reached up to return the case to his inside pocket. The gesture nearly caught Mark unawares, but at the last split-second he saw Tolliver's hand sweep up from his pocket. And in that instant Mark's right hand was blurring to his gun.

Tolliver had the advantage a shade. He wrenched his gun out of the shoulder-holster and brought it swinging down as Mark's weapon cleared leather. Then Mark was lunging to one side as Tolliver's .45 cut loose its deafening blast. Mark's tall frame flinched at the impact of the bullet low on his right side. An instant later his thumb had slipped off the hammer of his gun and its roar prolonged that of Tolliver's.

Ralph Tolliver straightened out rigid, as though paralyzed. His face twisted horribly and he dropped his six-gun and clutched at his throat with clawed fingers. Blood from a blue spot at his throat crept out between his fingers. He opened his mouth to speak but no sound came. And then, as Mark lowered his gun, Tolliver's solid frame tottered and he took a half-step that threw him off-balance. Abruptly his knees gave way and he sank to the floor, the force of his fall carrying him onto his back so that his two eyes stared upward, glassily.

Gail Sanderson's sobbing cry cut the momentary stillness. "You're hurt, Mark!" she choked out, coming quickly from behind the counter.

He stretched out a hand and stopped her: "It isn't much," he said reassuringly. And with that, an infinite tenderness edged out the fear that had shown in her eyes. Abruptly, Mark's right arm went out to her and she came to him and raised her face for his kiss.

Swain knelt beside Tolliver. "Cleanest shot I ever saw," he muttered, looking up at the pair standing nearby. But they paid him no attention, so he took off his coat and covered Ralph Tolliver's face with it. And as he got to his feet his face took on its first genuine smile in more than two days.

THE END

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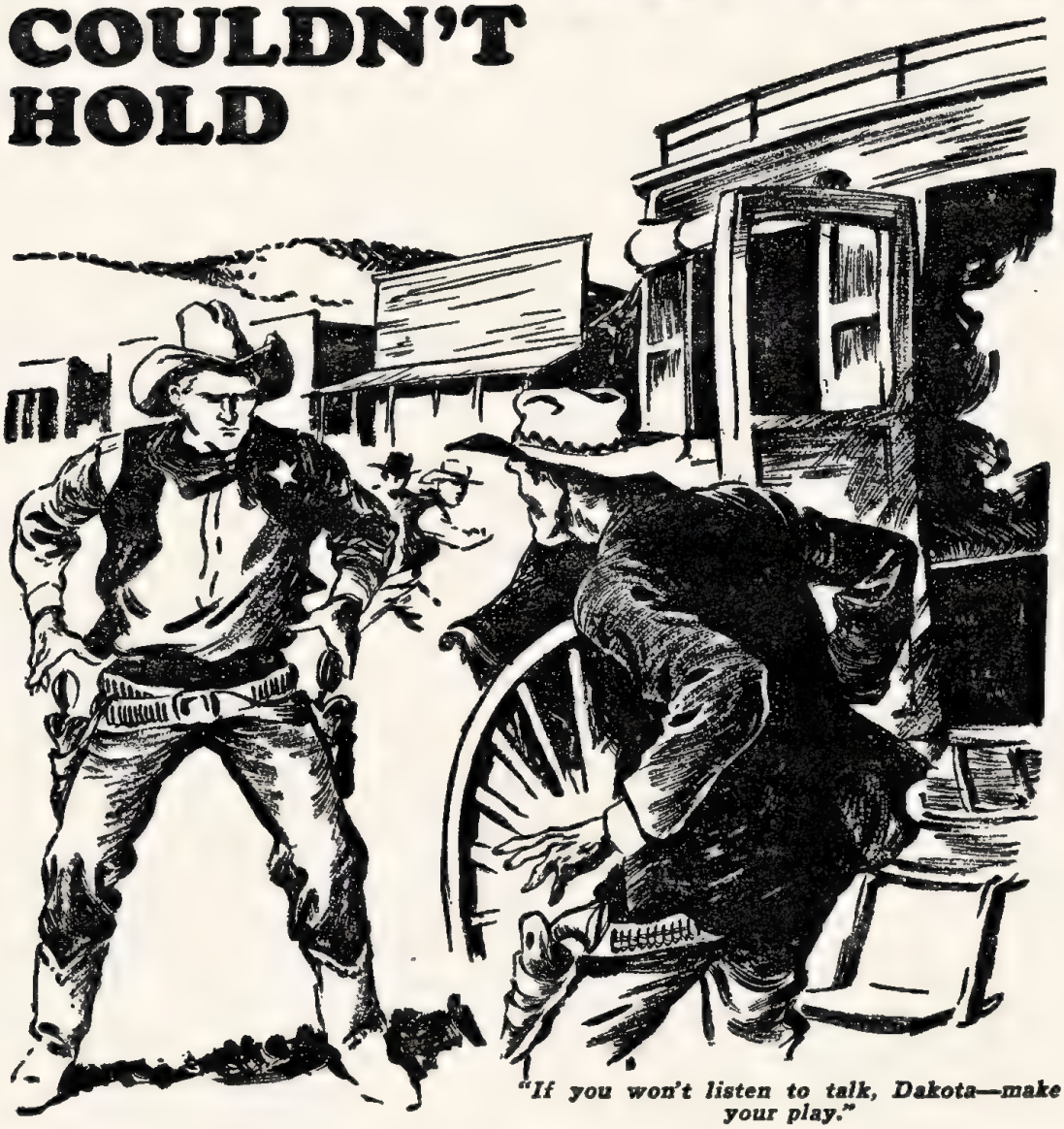

"If you won't listen to talk, Dakota—make your play."

By RALPH THURMAN

One flaming instant of crashing gunfire broke the body and mind of Speed Tonto, peerless Southwest lawman. . . . But it could neither break nor bend the finely tempered steel of his fighting heart—nor the mad determination that drove him on, to collect his suicidal payment from the man who had smashed him!

SPEED TONTO stepped from the shacky undertaking parlor in Snakehead to the sun-warped walk. There was a funny twist to his lips as he licked the quirley his long fingers had built. Speed Tonto had just picked out his coffin.

On the gray-templed gunman's shirt, his marshal's badge made a five-pointed glare in the sunshine. He pulled his white

hat down, shading the fatalism in his eyes. By the lazy way smoke spilled through his thin nostrils, a man could tell Speed Tonto wasn't nervous. Breathing èasily, regularly, he was enjoying that smoke. . . .

"My last," he muttered, looking at the gray ash.

There was no regret in his voice. Indeed, he seemed relieved, almost glad. Carelessly he flicked the butt, watched it arc outward, fall to the yellow street dust.

Two hundred yards up the street, the stage was rolling to a stop at the station platform. Speed Tonto shook the kinks out of his gun holsters and headed toward that platform. The lazy beat of his boots on the walk became like funeral music to his ears. He was smiling twistedly.

All along that suddenly deserted street, the word was going: "Dakota Moore's in on the stage! Yonder trods Speed Tonto —comín' to take 'im. Shut your doors an' winders, gents. She's fixin' to come a lead storm!"

Straight-backed, wide shoulders swinging easily, Speed Tonto came on. He saw a passenger step out of the stage. Another. Somehow, they seemed to blur in his vision as they stepped down. Somehow, they became mixed up with a picture of a pine coffin he'd paid twenty-five dollars for, back in Shovel Smith's undertaking parlor.

"Nothin' queer about it," he'd told Shovel Smith. "I'm goin' to be killed today. I want to buy a coffin. Nothin' fancy —just a box. You reckon this one would fit me?"

"Dakota Moore?" old Shovel had breathed.

"Dakota Moore."

"That tinhorn ain't as fast as you, Marshal," Shovel Smith had said. "I've heard tell . . . ."

Speed Tonto had looked at Shovel Smith. Old Shovel's hair and whiskers were white. His body was stooped, bent, his hands gnarled with work and age. The marshal shuddered every time he looked at the old undertaker, at the age and bent shape of him.

"I'll never git that way," Speed Tonto had promised himself silently as he looked at old Shovel. He, himself, was crowding fifty. His back was straight, his hands still supple. But sometimes it seemed he could feel age creeping up on him, slowing his muscles. He hadn't fought a fast man for almost a year. A man gets rusty, especially when he's growing old. And now—Dakota Moore. Speed Tonto was glad it would be the famous gunslick gambler who would kill him—not some cheap, unknown glory hunter.

"He'll beat me, Shovel," he'd smiled. "How much for this box here?" And he'd counted out the twenty-five dollars, laid it on the lid of the pine coffin.

SPEED TONTO saw the black-frocked Dakota Moore climb out of the coach now. He'd never seen him before. But he knew the tall gent with the pearl-plated .45's lashed low against his black serge pants was the notorious Dakota Moore.

Dakota's white hands knocked travel dust from his clothes. Glittery green, blinkless as a snake's, the gambler's eyes watched the lone lawman coming toward him, while the stage driver handed down his baggage.

"Might as well leave your bags up there, Dakota," Speed Tonto called. "Save loadin' 'em again when the stage rolls out in twenty minutes."

At his sides, Dakota's hands went still, deceptively limp. The man had a hatchet face, stamped with a cruel, stony coldness. He held that stony expression as he looked at the gray-templed gent who packed a badge on his shirt.

"I plan to stay," said the gambler in a toneless voice. "I've got a poker layout arranged for at the Smoky Rafters Saloon yonder. Objections?"

"Sort of." The marshal seemed to lean idly against the frame front of the stage

station, but actually he never touched it. "Your comin's been talked of, Dakota. I'm the law here. I've kept Snakehead clean for quite a spell. You got a bad rep. Your deck is crooked—an' your holsters too slick. Buy another ticket. Travel on."

Speed Tonto knew talk was useless. Only the hiding townsmen, waiting tensely, would listen to words. The tinhorn was settling his black-garbed body, getting ready to strike for those white-handled guns.

In the hush, the driver, guard and two passengers scuffled across the platform and through the station doorway to safety. The stage horses stamped, snorted. Flies buzzed. Speed Tonto drew himself up very straight, let his hands hang by his fast-slung cutters. He was looking at Dakota's stony, hatchet face. But he kept seeing his money on that coffin top. He kept seeing old Shovel's age-gnarled shape.

"I'll never git that way," he repeated in a whisper.

"Eh?" hissed Dakota Moore.

Speed Tonto smiled tightly. "I said, 'All right,' Dakota. If you won't listen to talk—make your play."

He saw the sunshine ride Dakota Moore's gun barrels. He felt his own guns leap as he hit their butts with his hands. He was too late. If he'd taken first bite, maybe . . . But Dakota's .45's were roaring, spitting flame.

After the first hot one, his body seemed numb to the shock of the other bullets. He saw a white snarl break Dakota's hatchet face apart. He knew his guns were lost from his hands. He saw the spinning platform come up to meet him. Then there was blackness . . . .

CROOKEDY Tonto, they came to call the man who lived for six months in a bed before he could walk—and who screamed the day he walked across the hotel room and saw himself in the washstand mirror.

Speed Tonto screamed and sat down on the floor. He screamed and cursed, shook and babbled crazily when he saw what Dakota Moore's bullets had done to him. He yelled that he would kill himself.

"Take 'er easy, Tonto," Doc Akers told him when he got him back in bed. "You ain't in such a hell of a shape as you let on by your hollerin'. You can walk, an' that's somethin'. Hell, you're lucky to be alive. Had four bullets in you. One crushed a vertebrae or two in your spine. Bent you up a little, is all. It ain't so bad."

"Ain't so bad!" Speed Tonto yelled at the little medico who tried to hold him in bed. "My back is bent damn near double an' twisted sideways. Gawd! I wanted to die, Doc. I wanted to die so I'd never get old an' stoopy like Shovel Smith."

He laughed, a cackling, crazy sound. "Now look at me! Look what Dakota Moore done to me! Where'd Dakota Moore go when he left here, Doc? I aim to find him. I aim to kill him—then kill myself. Where?"

Doc Akers shook his head patiently. "I've told you a hundred times. Dakota Moore took a north-bound stage the day after he shot you, Tonto. Word reached here that day that some government lawdogs was hot on his tail. He'd gunned down a soldier in a poker game. They was after him. He left here in a sweat. It's been six months. If they caught him, I never heard about it. Git some rest now, Tonto. Take 'er easy."

For four more days, Speed Tonto lay there, looking at the ceiling with mad lights playing across his sunken eyeballs. Each day, the medico helped him up and let him hobble about the room awhile. The fourth day, with Doc Akers out of town on a call, the ex-marshal got out of bed by himself.

He got clothes out of the closet, managed to put them on. They were his own clothes. But they hung like bags on his crooked, wasted frame. Hobbling to the

washstand, he got his guns. He laughed insanely, taking up four holes in the heavy belt as he buckled it on.

For fear he'd lose his balance, Speed Tonto went down the hotel stairs backwards. He heard the clerk suck in breath, and yell at him. He went on out, never twisting his head up to look. Men on the street said things when he bumped them blindly. Mumbling apologies and cuss words, Speed Tonto hobbled on . . . .

"Who am I?" he snarled at the staring cashier in the bank. "Hell, you know who I am, Jenkins. I want what money I got on deposit here. I'm leavin' town."

Jenkins gasped. Then he was pushing a little stack of silver under the grille, staring at the man who took it.

"Eight dollars?" rasped Speed Tonto. "Damn it, I said all!"

"Doc Akers has been cashin' checks on you, Mr. Tonto. You signed 'em. He—he said somethin' about your hotel bill an' meals."

For one awful moment, the white-faced Jenkins thought this twisted, broken old man was going to pull the guns tied to his skinny legs. Then, abruptly, Speed Tonto cackled his crazy laugh.

"Eight dollars!" he muttered, and he hobbled out, clutching the money in his hand.

The sour-faced gent who met his up-twisted gaze at the feed barn was a stranger to him. "Where's Cross?" rasped Speed Tonto.

"Cross?" grunted the stableman. "Mean that feller that sold to me four months ago. Reckon he left when I took over the barn, old man. I dunno."

"What about my bronc? Big dun with a Wagonwheel brand. You got 'im?"

"Your bronc? I sold that Wagonwheel dun, saddle an' all, for his feed bill, old man. Cross said hold 'im for a gent name of Tonto. He used to be marshal here. But I ain't holdin' no hoss that long."

The ex-marshal cursed. He held out his eight dollars. "Got anything looks like a hoss for that much?"

"Hell, old man, you crazy? Or you think I am? Eight dollars might buy you a burro. I got one a prospector left here."

A BEATEN look filled Speed Tonto's eyes. He dropped his head, which had grown snow-white these past months. The barn man spat and turned away.

"Le's see your damn burro," Tonto growled.

Grunting disgustedly, the hostler led the way to the back lot. Speed Tonto looked at the shaggy little beast that seemed as old and beaten as he.

"Damn jackass," muttered the stableman. "Blind in one eye. Eyeball's plumb white. White Eye, the prospector called 'im. He can see outa the other'n. Want 'im for eight or not, old man?"

"You—you reckon you could throw in some kind of piece of a saddle?"

"Saddle? Eight dollars? Hell, no, feller!"

"Then gimme some tow sacks to set on," said Speed Tonto. "An' a piece of rope to make a halter. Here's the eight bucks. All I got in the world, except my guns—an' I'll be needin' them. Come here, White Eye."

Ten minutes later the old burro shuffled out of the barn. Sitting his tow-sack saddle, Speed Tonto left Snakehead behind, heading north along the hot stage road traveled six months ago by Dakota Moore.

He'd never ridden a burro before. The slow going was torture for him. He kicked the animal, hammered it with his fists unmercifully. At each burst of punishment, White Eye would jump two steps —then settle into the same sleepy gait.

Blazing hot, the sun came down on the old man's hatless white head. A red film seemed to float in his brain. Once he drew one of his .45's and pushed it against his temple. His finger trembled on the trig-

ger. With a sob, he holstered the gun, babbled crazy curses at God and the burro and the hatchet face of Dakota Moore.

At a ranchhouse five miles from Snakehead, Speed Tonto bummed his first meal and watered White Eye. When he left he carried jerky and cold biscuits wrapped in a piece of newspaper. Two days later he leaned his twisted, exhausted body against the bar of the biggest saloon in a town called Buckhorn.

"My name's Tonto," he told the fat bartender. "I'm lookin' for a man named Dakota Moore. I ain't got the price of a dime shot of rotgut, feller—but I got a pair of .45's says you'll tell me what I want to know. You know where I might find this Dakota Moore? He's got a hatchet face. He's a tinhorn gambler, an' sports a black Sunday suit an' a brace of white-handled .45's. I want to know if you've seen or heard tell of Dakota Moore."

"I've heard," said the bardog. "Who ain't? But I ain't heard nothin' since a gent with a U. S. Marshal's badge asked me the same question six-eight months ago. Maybe they caught him. I dunno, old man. Have a drink on the house."

In a thousand barrooms and gambling halls, it seemed to the ex-marshal, they said the same thing. "I dunno, old man. Here, you look like you need a drink."

SOMEWHERE along the lonely miles of a trail that was endless and held no hope, the twisted man they were calling Crookedy Tonto lost his sanity. Up in Wyoming, they were telling tall tales of a crazy, hairy man whose clothes were tatters and who rode an old burro with a blind eye and tow sacks for a saddle. They said the man's name was Crookedy Tonto. They said he was looking for a gent named Dakota Moore.

Folks in the Medicine Bow country were scaring their young uns with the name of Crookedy Tonto. "You bet he's a hairy man," they told their kids. "Crazy as a bat. An' his back's bent an' twisted like a balin'-wire bridle. Quit actin' up like that—or Crookedy Tonto'll git you sure."

Tonight Crookedy Tonto rode a jackpined trail through the hills in the darkness. He'd started to make camp, then he'd seen the campfire's glow up the trail. He rode toward it, his hands gripping the butts of the guns he'd learned to drape across White Eye's withers to relieve himself of their weight.

"Dakota!" whispered this man, whose mind had played out on him. "Dakota? Hatchet-face!"

Presently he pulled the shuffling burro to a halt. He was edging the circle of firelight now, a tattered, bent scarecrow of a man astride a burro whose blind eye showed white in the dim light. There was no one about the campfire. But against the pines at the clearing's edge loomed dark shadows of tied horses. Maybe Crookedy Tonto didn't see those shadows. Maybe he didn't hear the cautious clicking of gun hammers in the darkness.

The old man sat his tow sacks, staring at the deserted campfire. Perhaps suspicion hit him then. He started to pull the guns his hands gripped.

"Hatchet?" he called hoarsely. "Dakota?"

Then guns were blaring, streaking redly from the gloom. Hot lead burned Crookedy Tonto. White Eye jumped, bullet-stung. Down the trail he wheeled, running. Senses failing him, Crookedy Tonto hung on. Guns behind him made the night roar.

How long he clung, almost unconscious, to the burro's shaggy back, Crookedy Tonto would never know. When he opened his eyes, twisted his head up, a huge star bobbed in his vision. Gradually

he realized the star was a lamp at a ranchhouse about a mile away. White Eye was headed for there..

He knew he was still bleeding from the bullet holes in his hide. He could feel blood running down his leg. He was terribly weak, getting weaker.

"Hatchet?" he whispered crazily. "Dakota?" And he knew no more until he fell to the ground, and the fall jarred him back to consciousness.

That ranch light was no more than four hundred yards distant now. He could tell that from where he lay. White Eye stood by, nibbling bunch grass. He started crawling toward the house, down the gravelly slope that cut his hands and elbows and clawed at his wounded, crippled body as he crawled.

A cigarette glowed down there on the porch. Through the star-scattered night, voices came to him. "But Frank, I'm worried," a woman was saying. "If it's a gang working this country, they likely won't stop till they get our cattle, too."

"I bet it's Crookedy Tonto, I bet." The voice sounded like a kid's of maybe six. "I bet it's him, Daddy. Mamma said he'll git me if I don't behave. Will he, Daddy?"

"You bet he will, Johnny," the man spoke up. "You listen to your mamma or Crookedy Tonto'll git you!"

Crookedy Tonto crawled on.

"Listen," he heard the woman say suddenly. "I hear something out there, Frank. Look! Oh God, Frank, it's a man! He's crawling! Come here, Johnny Hawkins! Don't you dare shoot him with that slingshot! Oh, Frank, do something!"

"Hatchet?" babbled Crookedy Tonto as the man came for him. "Dakota?"

FOR days, lying in bed at Frank Hawkins' ranch, Crookedy Tonto babbled his two crazy words: "Hatchet? Dakota?" Hawkins' pretty young wife doctored the bullet wounds in his side and leg. Soon he was sitting up in bed, gazing stupidly at tousle-headed little Johnny, who watched him with saucer eyes—and held his loaded slingshot in readiness.

Gradually, in these peaceful surroundings, with good food and tender care, Crookedy Tonto was regaining his lost sanity. The black curtain smothering his brain seemed lifting, slowly. Briefly, his memory would catch at things: things like his marshal's job; Doc Akers; the gun fight that had made a broken, crooked thing of his once-straight body.

Hawkins had found White Eye wandering loose and brought him in. Crookedy Tonto could watch out the window sometimes and see little Johnny riding the shuffling White Eye around the barn lot. He'd smile at things like that.

Sometimes he'd wonder who had shot him when he rode up to that campfire.

Learning to walk again, the old man remembered another time he'd had to learn to walk. He remembered the time he'd screamed, looking in a washstand mirror. Crookedy Tonto fondled the guns that hung on his bedpost. He swore he'd live to see Dakota's hatchet face blown to hell by those guns.

Grown stronger, he decided to leave the day a ranch hand came home sagging in the saddle, his gray shirt bloody. The cowboy was one of two working for Frank Hawkins' little spread. He was shot all to hell, and he was dying.

"Damn rustlers!" the man gasped. "We missed a bunch of white faces. Tracked 'em to where the snakes was tryin' to throw 'em across the creek. They outshot us. Got Frank an' Long Charlie trapped in the line cabin—tryin' to hold out till I got to town for the law. Couldn't —couldn't make it. We recognized 'em. They won't leave till they kill Frank an' Charlie now. We recognized Preacher Morgan an' his owlhoot snakes. Wanted outlaws, every man of 'em. Killers. . . ."

Crookedy Tonto helped Hawkins' wife get the man inside. He was going fast.

"Where's the line camp?" croaked Crookedy Tonto.

The man gave gasping directions. "No time to git law now, old man . . . No hope." He jerked in a spasm of pain, and died . . . .

There were no horses in the corral. Crookedy Tonto climbed on old White Eye, and buckled his gunbelt tighter about his broken middle. He grabbed a stick of stovewood. Beating the stick across White Eye's rump, he managed to get the burro into a graceless, jarring run.

"You can't do anything!" he heard Hawkins' wife screaming as she tried to follow. "Ride to town for the law. Oh, please! Please!"

Then he was going through a thicket of scrub pines, leaving her screaming voice behind. Crookedy Tonto knew he'd die today. And he knew that the sacrifice he aimed to make would cost him more than life itself.

For Crookedy Tonto's dream of vengeance, his dream of one day killing Dakota Moore, would be lost today. He'd die in this mad attempt to repay his debt to Hawkins and his wife and little Johnny.

THINKING of that, he let old White Eye slow up. Then he cursed and poured the stovewood stick to the animal's rump.

It seemed hours before he could hear the gun racket ahead. But now he could see the line cabin down there in the little brushy swale. He could see powdersmoke puffing away from the log side of it. One man, at least, was alive in the cabin.

The outlaws, maybe six, were bunched behind a cutbank near the cabin. Crookedy Tonto could see their hats, the shine of rifles and powdersmoke puffing up as they threw lead into the line shack.

Keeping to the brush, he came up behind them. He jerked his guns out, kicked White Eye forward, let out a wild, crazy war cry. The outlaws spun to meet the charge of this yelling, shooting scarecrow afork a blind-eyed burro.

"Look out, Preacher!" Crookedy Tonto heard one man holler. "By God, it's the old buzzard we shot at that night!"

The old man felt White Eye stumble under him as lead smashed through the little beast's shaggy hide. Crookedy Tonto screamed slobbery curses, and his guns sent out sheets of crashing flame. Little old White Eye stumbled, shuddered, and faltered gamely on. Then Crookedy Tonto saw the face of the black-clad Preacher Morgan . . . The cruel, hatchet face that had pulled him over a thousand miles of heartbreak trail!

"Dakota Moore!" screamed Crookedy Tonto. "This is Speed Tonto you're shootin' at, Dakota! Take it—damn your hatchet face to hell!"

White Eye died, and piled up under him. He knew that he too was down, dying. He shot at the shuddering shape in the black suit that sprawled on the ground before him—shot till his guns clicked empty.

He heard Frank Hawkins holler: "We got 'em on the run now, Charlie!"

Crookedy Tonto savvied now why he'd found no trace of Dakota Moore before. Always he'd scoured towns, saloons, looking for a gambler. Dakota Moore, with a U. S. Marshal on his tail, had hit the owlhoot for safety . . . .

Among his white whiskers, Crookedy Tonto's lips were forming a smile of satisfaction as he relaxed limply on his back. He lay still. Hawkins reached the cutbank, looked down at him. The rancher's tanned cheeks lost color, and he gasped.

Here among the dead men strewing the rocky ground, a ghostly thing had happened to Crookedy Tonto. For, in death, his twisted body had straightened out . . . Speed Tonto, the great gun-marshal had, earned his coffin.

A new Keko story

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

(Author of "A Timber Wolf Invades the Barrens," etc.)

Into the cabin clumped a thick, fur-clad form, a swarthy renegade native.

MATE FOR A NORTHLAND KILLER

A haunting, eerie song of death lifted across the Northland's icefields. . . . For a kidnaped white woman and a captive golden collie awaited the evil, ugly decree of a kill-maddened tribe of Singing Devils—while Dan Martin and a silver-gray wolf king prowled the snowblown wilds on the futile, trackless trail of their stolen mates!

KEKO, the great king wolf, poured a long and desolate wail across the Barrenlands. The big silver gray leader was alone in this vast, strange land.

Two nights ago, under the swishing canopy of the brilliant northern lights, Keko had led a band of Arctic white wolves to a kill. Tonight, although he had called again and again, there was no response from any single member of the pack—not even from Iskwa, his beautiful golden collie mate.

Keko was without understanding. If Iskwa heard, why did she not come in answer? That magnificent golden creature, which had been raised with Keko in captivity, would not have deserted him . . .

While Keko howled his calls in vain, his beautiful mate cowered down, a pitiful, beaten sight, under the lash of a pock-marked man creature, an Eskimo half-breed, who sought to whip her into submission.

Nista, the halfbreed, chuckled as he plied his long trail lash to the collie she. Ayaie! This was good. Soon he would force her into harness with his team; then, when the time was ripe, she would be staked out and bred to some Arctic wolf dog . . . . The man made a gesture of satisfaction. He would make much money from the stock of such a mating.

Iskwa revived some of the fighting fierceness which had come to her during her seasons of adventure with Keko, the great. Subduing a snarl, she whirled and slashed at the renegade's hand.

With a howl of pain, Nista leaped back, grabbing at his damaged fingers. Only his heavy bearskin mitten had saved him from a serious wound. The fangs of Iskwa were keen, and they struck with lightning speed. Had she not been secured by a stout rawhide thong and a length of chain, she might have ripped out the man's jugular.

Now as she shrank back, to lick her many wounds, she heard the distant wail of Keko. Her ears pricked forward. She uttered a low throat sound. But Keko's calls were becoming fainter, until she heard them no more. The big gray had circled far away from the camp of this unscrupulous halfbreed.

NISTA left the collie for the moment, while he treated his bitten hand. The wound wasn't much more than a superficial scratch, but he wasn't taking any chances on infection. As moonshine liquor bit into the fang marks, he cursed savagely. Perhaps he should kill this golden creature. Ayaie! Her handsome coat would make a beautiful robe, which would gain him the favor of the best native women.

But his mercenary ambitions predominated. There would be much wealth in the living Iskwa. He would take her to the haunt of Taluk, the white wolf leader, the biggest white wolf in the sub-Arctic.

Now there was other work for the scheming 'breed. Not far off, there was a herd of musk oxen, beasts held sacred by one nomadic band of Eskimos of Nista's association.

This band would pay much in rich fox pelts for the meat of the sacred beasts, which they feared to kill themselves. It was decreed by their shaman, their wise man, that he who killed the shaggy, sacred beast, would suffer torture and famine. But should one eat of the flesh, killed by another, he would be great in the hunt. He would have many good women and children.

Nista intended to profit by this old legend, as he had profited by other of the Northland's superstitions. He lived by his wits. Many of his crimes were cleverly laid at the doors of the igloos of that nomadic band.

Tonight, with Iskwa lashed securely to his sled, Nista would mush on to the edge of the Thelon reserve. A snow would be falling. The musk oxen would be yarded

up by the bulls; and the ranger, Dan Martin, and his wife, would be asleep in their cabin—while Nista's rifle and long-bladed knife performed their illicit butchery.

Nista lifted his bottle of moonshine liquor to his lips. It was of fiery strength, the same brand with which he overpowered the natives when other wiles failed. He drank a half pint and smacked his lips with great contentment. The bottle neck was still at his mouth when, from out of the whining night, came again that long, fearsome wail of Keko.

"Oh-h-h-h—O-o-o-o-o—"

"Tonnèrre!" the halfbreed gasped.

His body quivered. That was no call of a white wolf. It was too long, too powerful, too deathly.

Nista quaked with a sudden fear. The Eskimo in him awakened superstitions. That desolate wail recalled some of the spirit wolf stories told in the igloos, where seal oil lamps sputtered. The long call of Keko was the call of a spirit wolf . . . . Ayaie!

With trembling hands, Nista replaced the liquor bottle in his trail bag and drew the back of a hand across his mouth. He stood tensely, listening, but there were no more calls from Keko.

Nista seized his whip, took a stinging cut at Iskwa's unprotected body, then began to flog his team into line. Soon he would have a full sled load of musk ox meat for trade with his friends, the "Singing Devils."

The Singing Devils . . . . Nista shuddered. He hoped they would not chant their deathly incantations when next he met them, for when they did, it was a sign that they were out for plunder. They sang as they stole, and killed. . . .

HIGH on a desolate rise of land, Keko hoisted his long muzzle and sniffed the wind. He caught a faint trace of smoke in the air. It wrinkled his nose. It filled him with suspicion. For it came from the haunt of man, from a nearby man camp.

Keko chopped impatiently on stiff legs. He whimpered. It was in the camp of man that he had first met Iskwa . . . . He and the collie she had grown to near maturity together in the compound of this same man creature, but far to the south country . . . .

Many times Iskwa had felt the strong pull back to man and his mate. It was the powerful domestic dog instinct in her. Was she there now, again captive at the camp of the man who had raised her?

Keko had no means of knowing. He had failed to pick up a single trace of her scent. He could not understand her disappearance, for it was not the time of the mating moon yet, when she might have been lured off to the deeper hinterlands by some handsome white wolf dog.

As the wind drove steel-like snow needles into his skin, Keko tossed his head savagely. Again he howled out his long call to the golden she . . . .

At the ranger's cabin, Dan Martin swung around to face his wife. "Hear it, Betty? Keko again. He's done nothing but mock us ever since he led in that pack of white devils to the musk ox kill. By God! I'll have to—"

Dan broke off. A thin, wan smile had crossed his wife's features, a mirthless smile. It brought a furrow between the man's eyes.

"No, Dan dear," Betty breathed. "I'm not making sport of you. I'm—it's silly, I suppose—but I'm a little afraid of this whole Barrenlands zone. It's too mysteriously forbidding!"

"Weakening, Betty?" Dan smiled. "What's got you down? Your little trapline's profitable enough to keep up your spirits. You feel well, don't you?"

The girl's face had paled. There was something she felt she ought to tell Dan, and yet she hesitated. She was tired tonight, for her trip to her fox sets had taken her a long way today into a country

which overwhelmed her with its strange geographic make-up.

"Today, Dan," she breathed, "I was deep in that far canyon district, when all at once I heard voices. Now please don't laugh. I really heard them. I—"

"Better get to bed, kid," Dan advised, patting her arm gently. "Have a sleep on it; then—if you find this country's getting you down, we'll pull out. To hell with the musk oxen! You come first, but I'm afraid you're worn out tonight. Have a cup of black tea, straight, then turn in."

But Betty was not to be shaken from her story.

"I'm not the least bit hysterical, Dan dear. I heard some sort of weird incantation, just as sure as I'm sitting here. It seemed to come from nowhere, yet I knew it was there because—" here she paused a moment—"because, Dan, three of my fox sets had been robbed."

"What!" Dan jerked to his feet. "See any wolf tracks? It might have been Keko and his mate."

Betty shook her head. "I saw man tracks, Dan. Not only that, I was conscious all the way home that I was being followed. Once I stopped to listen, and I'm sure I heard the whine of distant sled runners."

Martin's frown deepened. Once, a few years ago, he had heard of the Singing Devils, but had immediately discounted the story as just another of the legendary yarns of this forbidding Barrenland territory. In Betty's eyes, he found no trace of hysteria. She loved the wilderness and its great romance. Her eyes now were the same deep frank blue eyes, appealing and warm. Dan Martin was stumped.

"So what, honey? Nothing happened, save that you're sure you lost some fox pelts. You saw nothing of any sled outfit, eh? You—Betty!"

Dan broke off suddenly. His wife's eyes were dilated in horror as she stared past him.

MARTIN rushed over and caught her to him. Speechless with fear, she was pointing at the window. Dan whirled, but saw nothing.

"Poor kid!" he husked. "Get to bed, and I'll brew some strong tea for you. Get along now, I'm going out a moment after wood."

"No! No, Dan! You mustn't go out there! I saw it—a face at the window . . . . A horrible Eskimo face!"

Dan patted her arm. By God! He must get her out of this country at once. With a smile, he took down his parka and mittens.

Betty attempted to remonstrate, but Dan waved her off. In spite of her cry of warning, he strode to the door and flung it open.

Dan had barely taken a step into the whirling snow, when some hard object crashed down on his head. He uttered a thick groan and slumped backward, across the doorstep.

Betty stared in terror at Dan's crumpling form. She screamed and whirled to snatch at a rifle.

Into the cabin clumped a thick, fur-clad form, a swarthy renegade native. He thrust himself forward and caught her to him.

A black mantle settled about the girl's consciousness—as dark a mantle as had dropped her husband, insensible in the snow at the doorway . . . .

Betty awakened to find herself wrapped in her trail clothing. The native had bound her with rawhide thongs: her ankles securely, her arms loosely. And now he was clucking to her in the gutturals of a thick broken English.

"I am Nakaiuk," he gulped. "You are my squaw. Go tribe. You go me . . . . Ayaie! Much blood flow if one tries take you."

So her fears had not been without foundation.

This shaman must have followed her

tracks to the camp. It was more than likely that he had tracked her with the thought only of pilfering her camp, for he knew she must have a number of rich fox pelts. But now he was abducting her, for the Singing Devils, of which band he was the shaman, knew no laws.

Lifting her struggling form into his powerful arms, he carried her out. She cried out to Dan as she passed his recumbent form. Then a half sob shook her. Dan lay very still.

Nakaiuk deposited her in his sled and secured her. Then paying out his trail whip, he clucked to his mongrel dogs and set them into a trot along the back trail. Soon the snows would cover his tracks . . . Ayaie! He had a woman for whom he would fight to the death.

DAN MARTIN was not dead. His parka hood had saved him from really serious damage from that crashing club blow to the back of the head. But it was a long moment before he could collect his wits, as he awakened from his semi-coma. It was the sharp crack of rifle fire that helped most to revive him.

The significance of those shots gradually dawned on him. Someone was molesting the musk ox herd. But more poignant than this thought, was the thought of Betty. A low gasp shook the ranger as he struggled to his knees. He was staring at the cabin door, which was partly ajar. Swirling snow was drifting into the shanty.

"God!" he gasped. Betty had been injured, too; otherwise, the door would be closed. She would be with him, if she were able.

He struggled to his feet. Reeling uncertainly, he clutched at the hewn jamb. He pulled himself indoors and called. The cabin was empty! Betty had been carried off!

Dan almost slumped out with the shock. His senses swam. He retrieved his fleeting wits and reeled across the room's narrow width, to snatch at his rifle. His knees buckled, and he was obliged to grasp a table edge for support.

As he came out of the fog, he began to realize that he must take things calmly. His head wound needed attention. He must have some stimulant before starting out on the trail of Betty's abductor. First, he must snowshoe over to the meadow, where last he had seen the musk ox herd. It was from that point that the shots had come. There must be some connection between those shots and Betty's disappearance.

Unsteadily, he fed wood to an almost dead fire. It's whitening embers told him that he must have been out for some time. It was a marvel he wasn't badly frozen.

In a few minutes he was able to wash the congealed blood from his wound. He treated the scalp wound and applied a bandage. Then he brewed a pot of black tea. He was revived by the strong brew. But it was almost an hour before he felt strong enough to hit the night trails. He had slung together a trail kit, rations and a sleeping robe of rabbit skin. There was no telling how long he would be out.

A firm resolve spurring him, he kicked into his rackets and struck out to eastward, shuffling along at an easy trot until his strength returned. It seemed an age before he at last fetched up by the sparse willow fringe screening the small musk ox range.

From nearby came the thick, throaty bellow of a frenzied bull and the blatting of a yearling calf. Dan pressed on, then suddenly chocked short in his tracks. A couple of wolf shapes leaped to the shadows, and Dan jerked up his Savage. But there was nothing to shoot at. The plundering night beasts had vanished. They had leaped from a grim shambles of offal and hide, the scene of a recent big kill.

As quickly as he was able, Dan rushed in. Five beasts had been slain, their but-

cher having cut away only the choicest parts of the meat, leaving the balance for the other wild creatures. Heavy snows had swooped down, obliterating all sign of the marauders.

Dan stooped and searched for upwards of half an hour. At last, in the gloom, he glimpsed the tell-tale impressions of a dog-sled trail, which even this heavy fall of snow could not altogether conceal. Snugging his Savage rifle securely in the crook of his arm, he turned and broke into a trot along the faint, snow-filled depressions which were his only clue . . . .

FAR along the white wastes, Betty Martin shrank down in the smelly sled robes. Her abductor had called a halt. Twice only had he pulled up his panting dogs since early morning. Now he came towards her, his hideous teeth bared. He slipped a hand from its heavy mitten and touched her face. He began to paw her body, as a dealer might appraise a prospective purchase. His throat convulsed as he made thick guttural sounds of satisfaction.

Betty wanted to scream, but her voice had left her. Now the man creature was offering her food, questionable looking frozen meat. It might have been fox flesh . . . . The girl turned her head.

As they resumed their journey, Betty thought she had caught the dim call of Keko. Now, as they mushed on, no sound reached her save the eternal whine of the sled runners and an occasional yelp from one of the dogs as the cruel lash of the shaman bit into its flesh.

Swift dusk was coming again—and, with it, a great dread to the girl. She would be out alone in the awesome sub-Arctic night with this horrible man-beast, Nakaiuk.

She shivered with fear and with great cold. Her legs were secured so firmly she found difficulty in keeping her feet from freezing. There was play in the cords about her wrists, and she reached down in an effort to free the hard knots about her ankles. As she bent over, she almost froze with terror, for out of the approaching night there came that weird, deathly incantation—the unearthly chant she had heard the previous day.

Betty's face paled. She straightened, to stare into the leaping flame of a campfire. A low gasp escaped her as she glimpsed, about the fire, a band of grotesque native shapes. They were the singers, the mysterious men of the far Barrens, grouped around their cooking pot.

A chorus of wild yells broke into the incantation of the natives. They had discovered the arrival of their shaman, their wise one. Two squat shapes leaped forward, arms outstretched. They were reaching towards the girl, when Nakaiuk slashed out with his trail whip. He raved at them in their native tongue, and his voice rose in a terrifying crescendo.

Then he suddenly turned and cut the thongs from about the girl's ankles. He helped her from the sled, roughly thrust her to a small skin lodge.

Betty dropped, gasping, to the floor of caribou hides. Black shadows engulfed her. Outside the raucous sounds of feasting and laughter reached her, but only dimly now. With a sharp little gasp, she crumpled and slipped out into a welcome swoon, and oblivion.

WILD shouts brought the frightened, insensible girl from her swoon. Her heart gave a sudden sharp tug as she caught a new voice booming in broken English.

"Ayaie! Thou hast done wrong, O Nakaiuk," the newcomer called. "A white woman . . . . But bring her out, and let her feast on the flesh of the sacred ones."

Nakaiuk came for the girl. He dragged her into the circle about the firelight. All at once, Betty recoiled. A soft, familiar whimper had reached her. She slowly

turned, to look into the glowing eyes of Iskwa, Keko's mate.

A sharp chuckle brought her about again. She gasped as she found a new, pock-marked face staring appraisingly at her trim form. It was Nista, the newcomer, who ogled her through slitted eyes.

"Ah-h—so! Mos' beautiful," he husked. He bent close to her and whispered for her ears only: "Do not 'ave fear, pretty one. I weel not let these Singin' Devils take you . . . . You shall become my woman."

With a thick snarl, Nakaiuk stepped in and thrust the halfbreed back, clucking murderous gutturals at him. An evil leer played across Nista's face. His eyes suddenly flashed flame and he turned to point to the golden collie she.

"There, O shaman," he clucked, "is the mate of a spirit wolf. You 'ave heard 'im call for her . . . To own her will bring thee great wisdom an' riches . . . Ayaie! I will trade her for this white woman—for the white squaw, an' the sacred meat of Mistoos. How?"

The rest of the band was closing in, gesticulating, eyes glinting now at Betty, and from her to the cowering shape of Iskwa. The natives began to bicker and wrangle. To them, this golden mate of a spirit wolf was much more valuable than a frail white squaw who might die quickly along the sealing trail. Ayaie! It was a fair bargain.

But Nakaiuk was adamant. He pressed back towards his captive, waving the others off.

Suddenly one young member of the tribe screeched and rushed. A long-bladed knife flashed in the firelight. Too late, Nakaiuk leaped to one side, his hand diving to the walrus-tusk hasp of his own knife.

The other struck fiercely, ruthlessly. Betty Martin gasped and shrank back as the long blade sank deep into Nakaiuk's body. The old shaman made a gurgling sound and spread-eagled out on the snow.

Now Nista jerked out his knife and hurled himself between the girl and the excited natives. Betty cringed back, her eyes staring wide in horror. Nista was momentarily cowing them, pressing them back . . . back . . . .

Iskwa whimpered at the girl's back. Betty suddenly felt a great pity for the golden she. Stealthily she reached forward and in a flash jerked the knife from the dead shaman's belt. As Nista forced the yammering band of natives back from the fire, the girl reached back towards the thong collar which secured Iskwa.

Iskwa's teeth bared. She did not understand this man creature's advances. Her fangs snapped, but Betty quickly withdrew her hand. Now she purred in a soft voice to the collie. The knife blade was creeping in closer—until, with a sudden, swift stroke, the keen blade severed Iskwa's collar.

Nista snarled. He was returning. He had seen. Betty called to the collie and reached out for her.

Quick as a flash, Iskwa backed off. It was then that she realized she was free. She whirled and bounded high, leaping deep into the shadows. But she was not clear of the firelight before the angrily snarling sled dogs, savage, hungry devils, hurtled from their snow beds. For many hours they had yearned to get at the throat of that golden she. Now eleven of them gave chase—blood-thirsty beasts that had not as yet had their sparse evening meal.

Betty turned. The halfbreed reached down and tugged her to her feet. Fiercely he snatched her to him.

"By the great Polar gods!" he snarled. "You set her loose! You weel pay for that!"

Betty's fingers tightened on the knife hasp, but as Nista embraced her closely, all her strength seemed to fly from her body. The knife slipped from her fingers. His coarse whisker stubble scored her

soft throat. She sank, helplessly, in a paroxysm of terror. A low moan escaped her, a moan which framed the name of her husband—Dan.

Nista let her drop roughly. He chuckled in a spirit of brutal conquest.

Cre nom! She would soon be his, for he would talk these natives into trading her for the musk ox meat. Right now they were huddled together, intoning one of their strange chants, invoking the spirits of their forefathers. When they came out of that communal huddle, they would either trade—or kill.

Nista wheeled away from that menacing incantation. Dimly he glimpsed the flying form of Iskwa, leaping ahead of the murderous, mongrel sled dog pack. Then suddenly the man froze in his tracks, for out of the night there came again that haunting wail—the long, resonant call of Keko, the spirit wolf.

"Oh-h-h-h-h—O-o-o-o-o—"

"Ay—aie!" The halfbreed quaked, for the Singing Devils too had heard that weird call. Their grim chant raised itself to a ghastly crescendo. And their words, well understood by Nista, struck new terror to his craven heart.

SHUFFLING along the back trail, Dan Martin suddenly chocked up short. He too had heard the call of Keko. It came from a point off to the right. Keko's call revived Dan's hopes. Where Keko ranged, the golden collie would not be far off; and since Iskwa had always held closely to the trail of Betty, there was a bare chance, a desperate hope that Keko's call might point the way.

A low gasp suddenly escaped the man. A pale lemon light, shuddering across the star-studded sky main, had suddenly burst out in a canopy of cascading, multi-tinted brilliance. Its mad burst of light was awe-inspiring. The mighty Polar lights had burst from nothingness to illuminate the grim tragedies of the wilderness.

Again Keko poured out his deathly wail.

And then, from some distant point, came an answering call. It was the cry of an Arctic white wolf, one of the pack which, a few days ago, Keko had led to a kill at the musk ox range.

Now a stealthy shadow flashed across Martin's vision. He glimpsed Keko's great shape poised on a wind-swept boulder, and beyond, the flying mass of the approaching ghost pack.

Dan watched the king wolf closely. Keko's agitation suggested something foreboding. Suddenly that thought formed itself into physical shape. Tongue lolling, legs scarcely able to support her any longer, came Iskwa, the golden collie, and at her back and flanks ran the snarling mongrel sled pack.

Two huge dog shapes whirled out, to head off Iskwa's flagging flight. One of the beasts was now close to the collie's side. He was stretching to slash at her throat.

Martin jerked up his Savage. His trigger finger was taking in pressure when Keko, the great, leaped out.

With a deep-throated snarl, the huge gray wolf king struck. Blood spurted on the snow as his fangs connected, then slashed in a tearing sidewise swipe.

In a flash there was a flurry of battling forms. The black mongrel weighed pounds more than Keko; part wolf himself, he was charged with great fighting fury, but Keko met him with a smashing butt stroke, rocking him back.

The man licked his parched lips and moved in closer. If necessary, he would protect Keko with his rifle. Keko, whom he had hated for his plunderings! Yet now the man was pulling for him, feeling that Keko and Iskwa had brought him a hope for finding Betty.

The battling wild creatures locked jaws and, in a mad flurry, sparred for an advantage. Keko broke the hold and whisked

off smartly as the big black mongrel charged. Then, practising the wiles of his great gray wolf sire, Otak, Keko leaped. He sprang high, and whirled in midair. As he struck next, he snarled a signal to the bellying white wolves, who leaped from the snow to attack.

Keko feinted in, brought the other to his feet. Then, with a short snarl, he struck, and this time there was no escape for the black. Keko's fangs had found their grim throat hold. . . .

Grimly, Keko held the powerful black beast up on his feet, while his powerful fangs sank deeper and deeper.

Blood gouted from the gap in the black's neck where, only seconds before, his jugular had pulsed. Dark crimson blotches stained a wide area of the snowland. On every hand, savage beasts fought claw to claw, fang to fang.

The man shuddered. Seldom had any man been afforded the opportunity of witnessing such a grim drama as this, set in such terrible brilliance.

Suddenly Martin started. Out of the east, from pretty close in, came the dull monotone of a weird human chant.

"The Singin' Devils!" he gasped. By the great gods! Here was the sound Betty had mentioned.

Dan's throat convulsed. No longer was there any interest for him in this gory fray of battling wolves and sled mongrels. Uttering a hoarse cry, he turned and struck off to eastward at a fast trot, following the trail along which Iskwa had fled for her life.

BACK at the camp of the Singing Devils, Betty Martin would have welcomed a swift death. Her eyes were dilated with horror as she watched the squat natives chop about the fire zone, in that weird shuffle accompanied by the grim chant of death.

Nista had his long-bladed knife clutched tightly in his right hand. He was too far from his rifle to chance trying to get it. He backed cautiously toward the girl.

"Be ready, white woman," he husked. "They are comin' for us both. They want you alive, but me they weel keel. Ayaie . . . . Wait!"

He broke off. The natives had ceased their dance and were now in a secretive huddle again.

Nista whirled on Betty. "Now!" he croaked. "Stan' between me an' the knives. I go for my rifle, an' then you come—queek . . . . I want you!" His voice broke. He seized her sharply and snatched her to him. Her white beauty was too much for him to resist, in this brief respite from the natives' menace.

Something stirred in the nearby thicket, but the sound was unheard by Nista. He pressed Betty to him, until his thick lips almost choked her. To her dimming consciousness came a human snarl. . . .

Dan Martin had seen. Dropping his rifle as he sprang, he hurled himself in and drove a smashing right cross to the side of Nista's face, only missing Betty by a scant inch or so. The halfbreed reeled and rocked back.

Betty uttered a sharp little cry as she dropped to her knees. A great, overwhelming happiness had come to her.

Now Nista was slashing in. A light scream from the girl warned Martin of the knife which gleamed in the halfbreed's hand. Dan sprang to one side and struck out with a foot as Nista charged. He whirled and hurled himself forward in a long flying tackle.

Both men crashed to the packed snow. Dan struck upward with a knee, sending the 'breed's knife flying into space. Now they were locked in a savage clinch.

All at once, Betty gasped in horror. Out from the firelight, knives raised, came the Singing Devils.

The girl crept back—back, until her leg struck the hard steel of Dan's Savage rifle. Now she was no longer afraid. Firmly

she jerked the rifle to her shoulder, ready in a flash to drop the first man who attempted to molest her husband.

Dan was straining to his feet. Using all his new found strength, he was dragging the 'breed with him. Suddenly, retaining a wrist hold, he snatched the lumbering shape to him. He socked Nista hard in the arm socket with his shoulder, and then hurled him out through space.

The halfbreed crashed hard, but he got to his knees. He was struggling to his feet when Dan leaped forward. Dan clamped on a merciless headlock, and tugged Nista up. The 'breed made an attempt to trip his white adversary, but Martin had already begun to lift.

With a savage cry, Dan hurled the heavy form over in a high arc, then suddenly let go. Nista crashed heavily amidst the sleds and camp litter. With a deep groan, he slumped out.

Betty Martin pressed her trigger, at the same time calling to Dan, who whirled as the native band pressed in.

The hand of the native leader went high. A knife dropped from his grasp. At once, all knives were dropped, and all hands lifted. The bark of that rifle and the whine of its high-velocity bullet had had its effect.

The natives began to make signs of friendliness, cowards that they were. Dan Martin slid over to his wife's side and took the rifle from her grasp.

"Awus, mucha Satan!" he boomed. "Get thee gone, else I kill thee all an' feed thy carcasses to the wolves."

By his gestures only, did they understand what he meant. They pointed to the sled load of musk ox meat which Nista had brought for trade. One man spoke a few words of broken English, and to him Dan addressed himself.

"Take the meat this time, dog," he boomed. "But get thee all away from this part. Take that devil 'breed with thee, and have a care. I shall send the great scarlet police on thy tracks. Get going! Awus!"

Now the natives were backing off, humming a thin chant under their breath. They retired to a discreet distance, in order to prove their friendliness toward this big white man who, with a snap of his wrists, had whirled Nista, the powerful, high in the air.

Dan turned and caught his wife to him. Their lips met in a lingering embrace, but neither spoke for a long moment. At last he pressed Betty gently from him.

"Let's get on our way, honey," he breathed. "I wouldn't trust these Singing Devils as far as I could hurl the whole bunch of them at one throw. We'll rig up light kits and mush out .... God! You've had more than your share of this desolate Barrenland zone!"

AN HOUR later, as Martin and his wife made camp in the shelter of a ridge, Betty suddenly caught her husband's arm. On a rise of land to the south, two familiar shapes trotted, side by side.

"Keko!" Dan gasped.

"And—Iskwa," the girl said huskily. "Look, dear, they're heading to the south."

Dan nodded. He drew his wife to him, with an arm about her waist. "Tomorrow, we head south too, honey," he said. "You've already had too much of this wild country. We'll get back to our old haunts along the creek. We'll—"

Betty cut her husband short. "I wonder if Keko and Iskwa will ever return there?" she asked.

From the height of land beyond, Keko poured out a long, challenging call. "Oh-h-h-h-h—O-o-o-o-o-o—"

It was as if he were making answer to the girl's question. Keko was returning with his mate to his old range along the far, southerly creeks, where Iskwa's many beautiful whelps had first seen the light of day.

OUTCAST OF THE WAGON CAMPS

The red devils were using white men's guns!

"*OH, Susanna, don't you cry for me,*
I'll get to Californy, despite the misery."

Like the wail of a banshee, the last word echoed along the trail, flinging itself against the flat hills and rumbling back with a dozen intonations.

Dan Selkirk, tall, lanky, burned a saddle-leather brown by the winds and suns of the Overland Trail, knew the levity back of the words was forced, but he grinned a little as he listened to this ribald variation of the trail song. There was nothing funny about what lay ahead, he knew. . . . For this was his third trip in charge of a wagon train from Independence to the West Coast.

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It was twenty-one hundred miles from the banks of the Missouri River to the diggings along the American; twenty-one hundred miles of constant forging ahead over sand, dust, rocks and desert; twenty-one hundred miles, between April rains and September snows, through a land occupied by hostile tribes. Twenty miles a day—every day—or else. . . .

Already the early morning trail cry of "Catch up! Catch up!" was passing from outfit to outfit. Five o'clock in the morning, and his eight wagons were rolling. For ahead lay Windlass Hill, the dangerous slide trail on the south bank of the Platte.

Behind, O'Fallon's Bluffs, Diamond Spring and Upper California Crossing on the Lodge Pole were fading into memory. A week ahead was Chimney Rocks, where north and south trails split. . . .

"If I get a chance to marry
One of Brigham's Mormon dears,
Susanna, I'll be true to you,
I'll stick right with my steers."

The voice of the minstrel faded. The crack of bull whips, the grinding creak of wagon wheels, the clank of hubs, the gradually rising clouds of dust rose into the still morning air. The train was on the move.

When the last of his wagons swung into the trail, Dan spurred up ahead to join his partner, Jim Taylor, who was leading the way. As he rode by ox teams dragging wagons laden to capacity, he exchanged greetings with the men who were matching their own physical endurance against that of the beasts on the long trek to the Pacific Coast.

He reined in alongside Jim Taylor, dark, taciturn, quiet-spoken, as the latter raised his hand and pointed.

"We weren't as smart as we figured, Dan," said the buckskin-clad scout, with whom Selkirk had joined forces the year before in contracting to handle emigrant trains from the river to Hangtown. "Buck Hayden is ahead of us."

"Tough luck," Dan said tersely, his eyes narrowing. "Hayden's outfit is in bad shape. If he breaks down on the hill, he'll hold us all up. I hoped to get down ahead of him. Maybe we could—"

He stopped short, apparently realizing the futility of the thing he was about to suggest.

Jim Taylor looked up quickly, sensing what was in his partner's mind. "Not a chance, Dan," he cut back. "Buck Hayden is too damned cussed to let us by, even if he knew he was goin' to break down and tie up every outfit behind him for a week. By gettin' an early start this mornin', I figured we could pass him before he got rollin'. . . . Ride ahead an' look things over."

DAN SELKIRK spurred his horse. A few hundred yards ahead he topped a rise. Before him spread the waters of the North Platte, reflecting the flat, early rays of the morning sun like a million diamonds. Ash and cedar, green, cool, inviting, spread along the banks of the stream five hundred feet below the cliffs. It was a sight to stir the hearts of the tired travelers, after weary miles of barren prairie.

Mother Nature had trapped this spot with a barricade of rock and sand, a veritable devil's maze. Again and again, men had sought to descend the precipitous battlement by some other means than Windlass Hill. The foot of every ravine north and south, a dozen of them in all, bore evidence of those hardy but misguided travelers who had attempted other paths than the tedious course down Windlass Hill.

Despite the fact that Dan Selkirk had never failed to be stirred by this view of the Platte moving lazily along at the foot of the cliffs, he was in no mood to

linger in contemplation of scenic grandeur. He fed iron to his horse, rode up to where Hayden, mounted on a rangy black, rode at the head of half a dozen nondescript patched wagons, as sorry an outfit as any that ever plodded westward toward the setting sun.

Dan Selkirk had seen Hayden once or twice in Independence the year before. He knew him by reputation, a sullen, beetle-browed man, broad of shoulder and short of neck and temper, whose standing was none too savory with other trailmen. Always Hayden was to be found in charge of a poorly equipped, poorly provisioned outfit, usually composed of families financially unable to make the trip—but who were making it, anyway, placing their trust in God and Buck Hayden. The fact that Hayden would undertake the job of getting them over the trail for half the money asked by other captains, should have warned them. Hayden had his own ways of making up the deficiency of his pay.

As Dan passed the lead wagon, he was surprised by a cheery, "Good morning," in a woman's voice. He turned quickly in his saddle, a little puzzled. Women as a rule did not travel in trains handled by Buck Hayden—at least, not such a woman as Dan Selkirk now found himself looking at.

The girl was no more than twenty. Her blond hair was the color of the wheat straw of her native Missouri fields, her cheeks as pink as those of a mountain apple. Only the deepest pools of the distant Platte could match the blue of her eyes.

"Mornin', ma'am," Dan returned, removing his hat. "You're off to an early start."

She looked across at him, tightening the reins on the off pair of mules attached to the lumbering wagon.

"Indeed we are," she answered. "Mr. Hayden will be the first to make Windlass Hill this morning. He says because I am such a good driver I can take my own wagon down ahead."

Selkirk's jaw dropped. "He's going to let you, a girl, take a wagon down Windlass Hill?"

She looked at him, her cheeks flushed. "It's thrilling, don't you think?" she asked naïvely.

His brows went into a flat line. "Thrilling—and foolish. At any minute you might have to jump for your life. It's a job for a seasoned whacker, not a girl."

He was aware now that Buck Hayden, who had been riding wide, had dropped back and pulled in alongside of him.

"Who in hell asked your advice, Selkirk?" snapped the black-bearded giant. "If you've got business with my outfit, talk to me. If Miss Marvin wants to take her own wagon down Windlass Hill, that's her business—and mine."

SELKIRK checked his rising temper. He pointed at the dished wheels of the rattletrap wagon the girl was driving.

"It's nothing short of criminal to let her take this rig down that hill," he said. "It'll go to pieces before it gets halfway to the bottom. The wonder to me is how it has held together this long."

Then to the girl he said: "Where's your men-folks, ma'am?"

Twin spots of angry red showed in her cheeks. "Up ahead," she answered, without looking at him, nodding toward an old man who trudged along beside a boy of fourteen. "You don't need to talk to them, however. I'm perfectly willing to take Mr. Hayden's advice."

"In that case, ma'am," Dan said stiffly, "I'm sorry I spoke out of turn."

He touched his hat. He kneed his horse closer to Hayden, and the pair rode ahead a few yards.

"I didn't come up here to start an argument, Hayden," said Selkirk. "My outfit is right behind you. We want to pass

before you get started down the hill."

Buck Hayden surveyed the distant river, spat copiously. He wiped the tobacco juice from the corner of his mouth with the back of a grimy hand.

"Yeah?" he said finally, as his black eyes beaded. "What's it worth to you. . . ?" Which was Dan Selkirk's introduction to one of the many methods by which Hayden augmented his cut-rate guiding fees.

A hot retort sprung to Dan's lips, but he controlled himself. "Anything within reason, Hayden," he answered evenly, suppressing a desire to plant his fist in the other's leering face. "You might break down. We can't chance the delay."

"Fifty dollars," was the other's calm pronouncement.

"Why, that's ridiculous, Hayden," Selkirk said angrily. "There's no reason why—"

"You can take it or leave it," cut in Hayden. "In fact," he added, with an ugly look, as his pugnacious jaw protruded threateningly, "I ain't so danged sure I want you ahead of me, nohow. The smell mightn't be to my likin'."

Dan Selkirk, leaning over in his saddle, slapped the other full in the mouth with his open hand. He settled back in his saddle, his hand close to his gun.

"Better learn to keep a civil tongue in your head, Hayden," he warned. "If you want to make anything of it, you know where to find me."

"You'll pay for that, Selkirk," snarled Hayden, his face red with anger, "an' it'll be more'n fifty dollars worth. Just because yo're drivin' a top-fitted outfit, you think you can run over folks not so well fixed. Well, damn you, now you *will* wait! I got first rights to the hill, and you can't hurry me none. If I can hold you up all day, I'll do it."

But he was talking to himself. Dan Selkirk had already wheeled his horse and started back to his own wagons.

As he passed the Marvin wagon, the girl was looking straight ahead, her glance lined between the ears of the leading mules. How much of the argument she had heard, Dan didn't know. It was perfectly apparent, however, that she was deliberately ignoring him.

Something that sounded suspiciously like, "Stubborn little fool!" slipped between Selkirk's lips. Immediately he had spoken he regretted it, and hoped the girl hadn't hard. He realized only too well that she was not to blame. Naturally, she would take the advice of the man in charge of the train. The old man up ahead, evidently her grandfather, and the boy trudging by his side could not be expected to exercise judgment in such a crisis.

Dan felt half-inclined to go back, reason with her, explain the danger again. Then he set his teeth resolutely, and kept on. He could still see the stubborn set of her head, proud, self-reliant, her eyes straight ahead.

"Little fool," he repeated, but his voice was soft and there was a touch of compassion in it.

He spurred his horse. . . . There was another way.

CHAPTER TWO

Toll of the Death-Won Trail

BACK with his own outfit, Dan quickly explained the situation ahead to his partner.

"Buck Hayden's up to his tricks again," said Dan. "Wanted fifty dollars to let us go around him."

Jim Taylor, shrewd, understanding, knew there was something more. "And what else?" he prodded.

"Jim," said Selkirk soberly, "there's a girl with Hayden's outfit; a girl with no men-folks except a grand-pap and a kid brother. She's got a rickety wagon that's due to fall apart any minute, and Hayden's goin' to let her head the train

down the hill. We've got to stop it. It's nothin' less than murder!"

"A girl drive a team down Windlass Hill? Hayden's crazy!" Taylor growled. "But what can we do? He's a mile ahead of us. He'll be the first outfit there, and he's entitled to go ahead."

Dan met his partner's eyes soberly. "He is—*if he gets there first,*" he said pointedly. "Look, Jim, that McConnellsville wagon is light, it's loaded mostly with spare parts. We could cut around by the Triangle route, where Mitchell took his train through last year. It's twice as far, but twice as fast. We might get to the hill ahead of Hayden."

Taylor shook his head dubiously. "No wagon could stand to travel at that speed without goin' to pieces. Besides, it belongs to Sullivan, not to us."

But Dan had ridden off.

It took him less than a minute to explain the proposition to Ed Sullivan, a hard-fisted little fighting Irishman from Illinois.

"The dirty hold-upper!" growled Sullivan, when told of the fifty dollar price fixed for the go-by. "Sure, we'll take a chance on it. If he breaks down on the hill it might delay us all day, to say nothin' of what might happen to the girl. We've dragged them extra parts all the way from the river, and all we've done with 'em is help other people. I'd admire a bit of scrap with that spalpeen, anyway. Let's be goin'."

In ten minutes the remainder of the load had been transferred temporarily to another wagon. With Sullivan driving and Dan Selkirk riding ahead to pick out the road, they left the main trail.

Over rocks, bouncing across ruts that were only dim markers of a previous drive, Sullivan piloted the mules, following the course set by Selkirk. The stout wagon clattered along the angling leg of the cut-off, then doubled back toward the main trail on the other bend, making by forced driving twice the distance Selkirk figured Hayden's outfit could move.

But Dan Selkirk had underestimated Hayden's generalship. Perhaps the latter sensed that Selkirk might attempt some such move, for no sooner had Selkirk and Sullivan swung back into the main trail than they realized they were too late. Hayden's half dozen nondescript wagons were already clustered about the little flat at the crest of Windlass Hill, a precipitous spot that got its name from the fact that wagons were generally lowered by means of improvised windlasses.

The Marvin girl's wagon was on the edge of the cliff, the lead mules unhooked and the rear wheels chained to keep them from turning. Even as they watched, the girl tightened the reins.

"We've got to stop her," shouted Dan.

HAYDEN turned as he heard the approaching rig. He was all ready to give the word to start.

Dan Selkirk brought his horse to a squatting halt. Flinging himself from the saddle, he strode up to the wagon-boss.

"If you're afraid to take that wagon down the hill yourself, Hayden," he barked, "I'll do it for you. There's no use of this girl risking her neck and smashing her outfit."

He turned to the girl and said, "Let me have the reins, miss. I'll—"

Rosalind Marvin was a spirited young woman, and Dan Selkirk had done the very thing to put her on her mettle. As he put his foot on the hub of the front wheel, preparatory to mounting to the seat, the whip in her hand fell across the team—and they surged into the collars.

By the time they had moved half a dozen feet, the front wheels dropped over the crest of the hill. Despite the chained wheels, the weight of the wagon was sufficient to start the wagon down the hill at a dangerous speed. The mules plunged

forward, frightened by the steepness of the grade, stung by the lash in the hands of the girl. Their jerking plunge gave the wagon added momentum. And before Dan Selkirk could get into the seat beside the girl, a second lunge threw him off balance.

With one hand on the edge of the seat, the other grasping the forward bow of the wagon top, he hung precariously between the two wheels as the swaying vehicle started like a plummet toward the bottom. Valiantly he struggled to pull himself up out of the trap in which he hung. The rear wheels were not rolling; but, chained as they were, sliding down the steep incline, they were more dangerous than if they had been turning. . . . If he lost his hold, the steel tires would cut him in two like a giant knife.

The girl was exerting superb horsemanship in an effort to avert the impending disaster. But no horsemanship, no skill, could slow up that grinding Juggernaut that was gaining speed with every foot.

"Don't turn the mules!" gritted Dan Selkirk, as he clung on, hopelessly trying to lift himself by the strength of his arms. "We'll turn over and—"

Halfway to the bottom, the wagon struck a jutting piece of rock that bounced it to the left side of the trail. Striving to overcome the sideswing by pulling the mules in the opposite direction, the girl got one of them into uncertain footing at the side of the trail. The animal fell, dragging the other down.

The reverse swing was too much for the weakened spokes, and the rear wheel on Dan's side parted company with the hubs. The rotten harness, unable to stand the jerk of the full weight of the wagon, broke. Dan flung himself clear of the wreck as his feet touched the ground, and the wagon, swaying crazily, started a straight plunge for the bottom, as the other wheel tore loose.

Cut, bleeding, Selkirk struggled to his feet. The girl, panic-stricken now, was standing half-erect in the weaving front end of the wagon. The back end was bouncing wildly on the stripped hubs.

"Don't jump!" yelled Dan, cupping his hands. "Ride it down!"

The girl either did not hear or she misunderstood what he said, for, with a hopeless glance over her shoulder, she gathered her skirts and flung herself wide of the plunging two-wheeled wreck. Her helpless body rolled over and over beside the trail.

The wagon struck an angle in the road, bounced high, and went sailing through the air. It landed fifty feet below, with a splintering crash, its contents flying in all directions.

Those who had witnessed the scene from above now clambered down the hill on foot, anxious to give aid, and in the van was Ed Sullivan. A dozen steps behind came Buck Hayden.

SCRATCHED, smeared with blood, limping from a bad bruise on his leg, Dan Selkirk was the first to reach the girl. He gathered her in his arms and laid her unconscious form on a flat rock.

"Get water, Sullivan," he ordered, as the Irishman reached his side.

Sullivan made the fifty yards to the river and back in seconds, carrying water in his hat.

"She's not badly hurt," Dan said, bathing the girl's face and arms. "More scared than anything else."

He looked over the edge at the splintered wreck of the wagon. "Reckon it's a good thing she did jump," he said slowly.

"She wouldn't been hurt at all, if you'd minded your own damn business," cut in Hayden. "You're to blame for wreckin' that wagon. You've got to pay for it."

Ed Sullivan looked at Hayden grimly. "There'll be more'n one kind of a pay-

off before long," he said grimly. To Selkirk, he added: "We'll move her stuff into my spare wagon. 'Tain't safe for a gal like her to be travelin' trail with a side-winder."

Hayden flared up angrily. "You cain't do that. Her and her grandpap contracted me, an' they owe—"

Old Man Marvin, who had followed the others more slowly, said, "My grandson'll pay you as soon as we get to the diggin's, Hayden. I promised you that."

"How much they owe?" asked Sullivan bluntly.

"A hundred dollars," Hayden answered, watching the Irishman greedily. "You goin' to—"

"I'm goin' to pay it," snapped the Illinoisan, pulling out his leather money sack. "She can have my wagon. An' from now on, she's travelin' with our outfit, not with yours."

He handed Hayden five twenty dollar gold pieces, which the trail-man took greedily.

"It's worth that much to get shed of you, Hayden. Of all the dirty skunks!"

Hayden shoved the money in his pocket—and, with the same motion, jerked at his gun.

"Why, you sawed-off little runt!" he shouted. "You can't talk like that and — I'll gun-whip you to an inch of your life!"

Sullivan had turned away. Kneeling on the ground, Dan Selkirk was in no position to interfere. He had just slipped his arms under the half-conscious form of the girl, to carry her to the bottom of the trail.

"Sullivan!" he shouted. "Look out!"

Rosalind's young brother, boy-like, had picked up one of the spokes of the broken wheels as he came down the hill. He was standing ten feet away when Hayden started for his gun. . . . As quick as a flash, he hurled the spoke.

Hayden didn't even see it. It struck him flush on the temple. He went down like a poled ox, but was up again instantly, fighting mad.

Sullivan, turning just in time, saw what had happened. He tried to stop Hayden's bull-like rush for the boy, but the huge trail-man swept him aside with one blow.

ROSALIND, in Selkirk's arms, seemed by some sixth sense to realize her brother's impending peril. "Bobby!" she shrieked. "Run!"

But Bobby Marvin, standing sturdily on his feet, did not run. "You was goin' to hit from behind!" he yelled at Hayden.

Hayden's flat hand cuffed the boy alongside of the head, sent him sprawling. "Yuh damned brat!" he snarled. "I'll learn yuh—"

Selkirk put Rosalind down, and rushed in. He cut in between two men who were headed toward Hayden.

"Let him alone!" he gritted. "If you've got to fight—"

Crack!

Dan Selkirk's hard fist smashed full into Hayden's mouth. The trail-man staggered, but didn't go down. In his dash at the boy, he had dropped his gun. Bending over, he scooped it up from the ground and bore in on Selkirk.

"Damn you for a meddler, Selkirk!" he ground out between battered lips. "There ain't room enough on this trail for the two of us!"

The gun was moving in an upward arc, fast as a flash of light. Selkirk's move, actuated by a subconscious knowledge of the other's purpose, was a split-second speedier.

The walnut-butted six-gun at his hip fairly leaped into his fingers. It barked with an angry roar, and the heavy slug tore into Hayden's shoulder. The impact of the bullet spun the trail-man half around, the gun slipping from his relaxed grip as he clapped his left hand to his

upper arm. His face twisted in agony.

"By God, Selkirk," he cried, "you'd better have shot to kill! I'll get you for this!"

"You're not hurt, Hayden," returned the other, holstering his gun. "The wound will heal sooner than your dirty tricks will cure. As far as the trail not bein' big enough for both of us—it's a long trail, and you'll do well to keep away from me. The next slug I send in your direction will do more damage."

Blood was slowly oozing between the fingers of Hayden's left hand as he walked away between two of his lieutenants.

"Thanks, mister," said Bobby Marvin, sticking out his grimy fist. "When I get as big as you, I hope I can shoot that fast, too."

"I hope you'll never need to, Bobby," said Dan, slipping his hand around the boy's shoulder. "Anyway, you're goin' to travel with our outfit now, and I'll teach you how to handle a gun."

Ed Sullivan had been bustling around like a fussy old woman, and now his voice coud be heard shouting, "Buck Hayden's been delayed, folks. It's too bad." His grin was as wide as all outdoors. "Some of you men help load Miss Marvin's stuff in that new wagon I'm makin' her a present of, and we'll get goin'. Hayden can pull in behind, or stay where he is until the buzzards get him."

And, although it was not the province of the cocky little Irishman to be issuing orders, nobody seemed to mind.

CHAPTER THREE

The Frontier Exacts Its Tribute

USING jacked-up wagon wheels as windlasses to help lower the outfits over the edge and down to the bottom of the hill, Dan Selkirk and Taylor had all their wagons safely on the ground below and ready to roll within two hours.

They passed Ash Hollow without stopping, already delayed on the daily schedule by the clash with Hayden. Teams and wagons were congested about the settlement. Rigs that had been wrecked on the precipitous sides of Windlass Hill were in the hands of smithies who were doing a land-office business beneath the trees.

Had they stopped, they could have heard new tales of the golden sandbars in the narrow channel of the American River—or first-hand accounts of the unbelievable hardships along the Humboldt and up the east side of the mountains; tales of Indian depredations and killings. But those stories were not what the westbound pilgrims wanted to hear.

Sure that their wagons were rolling safely on the way toward Marshall Pass and Fort Bernard, Dan decided to double back to Ash Hollow to pick up what news he could. To have permitted a stop would have meant the loss of a whole day, but he knew the importance of getting the latest trail gossip. He'd be back by dark.

Rosalind had been taken in charge by some of the women riding with Dan's train. Grandpa Marvin was driving the new rig, swelling with importance. And at the flank of Dan's horse rode Bobby Marvin, mounted on a pony the big-hearted Ed Sullivan had given him.

"I'm sure glad we're travelin' with your outfit now, Dan," he said, his manner more like a grownup's than a boy's. "I never did like that no-account Buck Hayden nohow. He's packin' flour, Dan. Says he'll get big prices for it. You'd think it was gold dust."

Dan laughed. "Well, it just about is, sometimes, Bobby." I've known flour to sell for a dollar a pound—and hard to get at that. Then, other times, it's thrown away like the clothes and bedding around Ragtown, just as folks throw away anvils, plows, anything that holds them back along the sink."

Bobby grunted disdainfully. "Well, I don't like him. Neither does sis. She slapped him once for somethin' he said to her; an' gals don't do that unless—"

He looked toward Selkirk for confirmation, and Dan said nothing, but he had his own opinion as to why Rosalind had found it necessary to slap Buck Hayden, although so far as he knew Buck Hayden's weaknesses did not include women —at least, on the trail.

They rode through the encamped wagons, approached the log house that bore the legend, "Ash Grove Hotel." A group of men at one corner of the hotel was engaged in a discussion with a miner who was bound back for the East.

"I tell you them Injuns *is* usin' Sharp's rifles," the miner said, beating the palm of one hand with the fist of the other. "They're gettin' damn smart with 'em, too. It's bad enough to fight 'em with their natural weapons, but when you got to fight 'em with white men's guns, an' Buffalo guns at that, it's plenty tough."

"Where they gettin' 'em?" someone asked. "Where they gettin' ammunition? They might get one or two offen dead Buffalo hunters, but Injuns don't mess with Buffalo hunters. And ain't no Injun alive smart enough to load cartridges. Some renegades are sellin' 'em—"

Dan and Bobbie walked on.

"Do you really think we'll have Injun trouble?" Bobby asked.

"I don't think so," answered Dan, smiling a little at the boy's earnestness. "The Sioux, Arapahoes and Cheyennes have been quiet. We're getting out of the Comanche country, and the 'Paches seldom get this far north. Beyond Fort Hall and along the Snake, we may bump into some Diggers, but—"

Bobby's young eyes were cold. "Any white man that'd sell rifles to Injuns is a skunk. He'd ought to get a dose of his own medicine."

Dan Selkirk nodded his agreement. . . .

THE train, under the leadership of Jim Taylor, had already thrown off for the night when Dan and Bobby caught up with them late that afternoon.

Rosalind, up and around now, greeted them. She was unharmed save for a few scratches that were neatly patched with court-plaster.

There was a shy reserve about her manner as she said to Selkirk, "I'm sorry about what happened. I should have taken your advice."

Dan Selkirk stammered some reply. Under the direct gaze of this girl, he felt suddenly ill at ease.

In the days that followed, Dan Selkirk found more and more occasion to be with Rosalind. She was driving her own wagon again. Often Dan would swing from his saddle, step on the moving hub of her wagon and jump up on the seat beside her, his horse trailing.

They saw nothing of Buck Hayden now. He had dropped a day behind them, but riders who came up from the rear brought stories of his ill temper.

Before they reached the American Fur Trading post at Fort Laramie, they received their first setback. The heat of July, the constant diet of meat, the alkali water of the plains began taking toll.

Three times they listened to the reading of the service for the dead. Gaunt, hungerworn, tired, they pulled into Fort Laramie late in August.

Always from the rear came stories of loose talking by Buck Hayden, what he would do when he caught up with Selkirk—threats to which Dan paid no attention. He was having trouble enough with his train now, what with sickness, loss of oxen, break-downs.

A precious week was lost at Laramie. Riding boot to boot with Jim Taylor, as the wagon train finally shoved its way through the sandy stretches of the Sweetwater, toward Burnt Ranch and the South Pass, Dan Selkirk announced his inten-

tion one day of riding back and having it out with Buck Hayden.

"You'll do better to let things rest as they are, Dan," said the cooler headed Taylor. "We've got a job to do. Carson Sink is still ahead, and we're nearin' August. If it shows early this year—"

"Buck Hayden's not the man to let it rest, Jim," said Dan soberly. "He'll strike sooner or later—probably in the dark. I wanted a showdown with him in Laramie. I wonder why we didn't see him there? He was supposed to be only a couple of days behind us."

Despite the opinion of his partner, Dan Selkirk, alone, doubled back on their trail. The train had elected to follow the Big Sandy and Sublett cut-off to Hahn's Fork. At Fort Bridger Junction, Dan learned why Buck Hayden had not caught up with them—he had taken the Mud Creek route, shorter but reputedly almost impassible. If he got through, Buck Hayden would reach Fort Bridger two days ahead of Dan's outfit.

Dan wondered why, with the rickety wagons and poorly conditioned stock, Buck Hayden would elect to take the shortcut. He was told that Hayden's was the only outfit to have taken the lower road in two weeks. Still wondering, he rode back to join his train.

Three days later, they camped for the night near the only water they had seen that day. A distant flicker of light attracted the attention of Selkirk, and he called Jim Taylor's attention to it as they stood outside the circle of the campfire after the evening meal.

"Injuns?" asked Bobby, standing at Dan's elbow.

"I don't think so, Bobby," replied Dan. "If it was, we wouldn't see that fire. It's too big for an Injun fire—it's a white-man's camp."

"Bet it's Buck Hayden," returned Bobby. "He's worse'n any Injun."

"We'll keep a sharp look-out tonight," said Dan. "'Bout daybreak I'll ride over for a look-see."

Half an hour before dawn Dan Selkirk was astir. He saddled his horse and left camp without arousing Taylor. If Buck Hayden was that close, he wanted to know it. There was something queer about Hayden taking the cut-off.

SELKIRK had learned at Laramie that Hayden's outfit was down to three wagons and half a dozen men. The Indians were raiding isolated trains, and the cut-off led through some of the worst of their territory.

Just as the first gray of dawn tipped the eastern mountains, Selkirk saw the camp. It was Hayden, all right. Dan recognized the rattletrap wagons. He saw something else at the same time—and it caused him to catch his breath . . . Bobby Marvin! The boy, imbued with the dream of becoming a scout and trail driver, had taken things into his own hands. He must have left the wagon camp before Dan. Now he was close to this sleeping camp.

Dan reined in. Something was moving in the distance, something that warned him instantly—Indians!

He could see them now in the breaking light—twenty or thirty of them. They were sneaking up on the sleeping camp, and there was nothing Dan could do about it. For Bobby was between the camp and the Redskins.

Dan stood up in his stirrups, yelled at at the top of his voice. "Bobby! Run! Run for the wagons!"

Too late! The Indians burst into wild yells and attacked.

Spellbound, Dan watched. The red horde swooped upon the sleeping wagon train like swarming animals. It seemed unreal, like something that was being enacted on a stage. There were a few ineffectual shots, then a red glare as the Indians applied the torch. Bobby had dis-

appeared. They were driving off one of the wagons. Queer, thought Dan.

Despite the fact he was one against a score, Dan spurred his horse. As he galloped toward the scene, two riders came in from the quartering side of the clearing—Jim Taylor and Rosalind Marvin.

They reined up, a wide-eyed trio, surveying the carnage. The Redskins had done their work well. There were a half dozen prostrate bodies, the smoking framework of the wagons.

"Buck Hayden's outfit," said Taylor hoarsely, "Wiped out."

Rosalind's eyes were on Dan Selkirk. He feared the question that was coming, a query that he sensed before she uttered it. He wished that he could spare her what he feared they were going to find.

"Bobby?" she asked flatly. "Where is he? He came with you, didn't he?"

Dan shook his head.

"We'd better get back to camp, Miss Marvin," cut in Jim Taylor, warned of the truth by his partner's quick glance.

In the still morning air there was no sound save the crackling of the flames over black ribs that had once been wagons. . . .

"Dan! Dan!" The cry was weak, yet they recognized it as Bobby's.

"Oh, my God!"

Rosalind's cry came straight from her heart. She flung herself from her horse, dashed toward the smoking embers.

"Bobby! Bobby!"

The child's eyes were only for Dan. "Dan, you got to know—"

He was fighting to say something now, before it was too late. "Hayden," he rasped through foam-flecked lips. "He—"

Rosalind gathered her brother into her arms. "Hush, Bobby!" she whispered. "We'll get you back to the train."

Valiantly the boy tried to go on. "Flour," he gasped. "They took the flour —Buck Hayden went with them. He—"

The lips trembled, were still. . . Bobby Marvin had paid his tithe toward the western march of civilization.

CHAPTER FOUR

Deserter's Doom Train

DULL-EYED, Rosalind looked from one man to the other, seeming to seek reassurance against the fearful realization that tugged at her consciousness.

"He's not—he's not—" Her lips would not form the word she feared to utter.

Jim Taylor tried to help her to her feet, as Dan Selkirk slipped his strong arms beneath the still body of the boy. She tore from Taylor's grasp, faced Dan Selkirk, eyes agleam.

"He's dead!" she screamed. "You're to blame for it! It's your fault—teaching him to be 'trail-wise', teaching him to use guns, giving him the idea that a trail scout was something any man might be proud to be. Now he's dead—dead because he tried to be like you . . . I hate you! I hope I never see you again—you beast!"

Jim Taylor's eyes sought Dan's, as he held the sobbing girl with both hands.

"I'll stay here, Dan. Send somebody from the train to help. . . . She—"

Dully, Dan mounted his horse, neck-reined the animal away from the scene. Every cherished dream he had built, dreams in which Rosalind and Bobby played all-important parts, lay crushed beneath the smoke-haze of the wagons.

Rosalind's accusation was unjust, unfair. It rankled to the quick. He had loved Bobby, hoped to see him grow up to be a self-reliant youth, capable of facing the hardships of the great West.

The death of the boy cast a pall over the already decimated group of pioneers. They buried him at the foot of a granite cliff, marked the spot with a huge boulder. During the entire brief ceremony, Rosalind refused to meet the glance of

Dan Selkirk. He longed to explain to her that Bobby's death was as great a shock to him as it was to her, but the girl kept to herself, tight-lipped.

A week later the train was attacked by Indians. Grimly, tight-lipped, they fought them off. The emigrants lost not a man —the Indians a dozen. As he stepped through the dead bodies of horses and Indians after the fight, Dan picked up a gun dropped by one of the Redskins. The men at Ash Hollow had been right—the red devils were using white men's guns!

"I'm not crazy," one of the men of the train was stating loudly. "I tell you, they were led by a white man. He wore a breechclout like the rest of them, but his skin under his arms was too light-colored to be that of an Injun."

Dan Selkirk listened, but said nothing. It wasn't the first time he had heard of bands of marauding Indians being led by renegade whites.

That night at the campfire he took apart one of the captured Sharp's rifles to clean it. Guns were valuable.

He unscrewed the plate—and stared. There was something inside that was powdery and white. He touched it to his lips grimly. It was *flour!*

He remembered what Bobby had tried to tell him the morning of the raid on Hayden's wagons. He remembered what the boy had told him at Ash Hollow about the precious load of flour. He remembered that of all the men in Hayden's train, Buck was the only one who wasn't found after the massacre. Most of all, he remembered how the Indians had burned every one of the wagons except the one containing the flour. Hayden had had guns hidden in those barrels of flour!

For long hours after the camp was asleep, Dan sat staring into the fire. The midnight sentries were changed, and still he crouched by the dying embers.

At daylight, when the turn-out call was sounded, Dan Selkirk was missing.

A NOTE, pinned to Jim Taylor's saddle, was briefly explanatory. "The train doesn't need us both," the scribbling read. "Carry on, Jim. I'll see you later."

If Rosalind Marvin missed the presence of Dan Selkirk, she gave no sign. Jim Taylor made some sort of lame explanation when queried about the missing trail man, but it remained for Rosalind to express the opinion that soon became prevalent in camp—Dan Selkirk had deserted his charge. True, Jim Taylor was perfectly capable of taking the emigrants through—if they could get through. Despite Jim's denials of the whispers that came to him, the view persisted that Dan Selkirk had abandoned the train.

Days stretched into weeks. Stubbornly, like the wheels of civilization itself, the train fought on. Twenty miles a day . . .

With blankets over their shoulders against the night chill, after a day of torrid heat, Jim Taylor and Rosalind sat before the campfire. The scout's face was drawn, lined.

"You're afraid we aren't going to make it, aren't you, Jim?" the girl asked calmly. "You can tell me. I'm not frightened."

He shook his head. "I dunno," he answered. "We're the last outfit to go through. Not only that, but—" He looked at her strangely for a minute before he added: "I miss Dan."

Her lips tightened. "I wonder—where he is?"

It was as much a statement as a question—the first indication in weeks that she had the slightest interest in Dan Selkirk's whereabouts.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Knives Break Gun-Odds

MIDNIGHT! Jim Taylor made the rounds of the sentries. They were brave men, all, but even after months on the trail, most of them were still unaccus-

tomed to the vast silence of the wastelands.

"Feel kind of funny, Jim," one of them said, when the scout brought him a can of coffee from the all-night fire. "Reckon there's ary chance of—"

Jim Taylor shook his head. "Not much chance of anything happenin' before daylight," he answered, his voice hushed by the oppressiveness of the silent night. "Injuns won't attack before dawn. The Great Spirit of the Redskins says that—"

The sentry grabbed his arm, pointed. "No?" he whispered. "Look here! If that wasn't one of the damned varmints—"

"You'd better turn in, Wagner," said Taylor, patting the man's shoulder. "Your nerves are gettin' shaky."

Wagner leveled his gun.

"Don't shoot," hissed Taylor. "You'll wake the camp." His hand knocked the gun from the other's grasp.

"Better they'd be awake an' face it," almost shouted the man, "than to—"

Jim Taylor's hard fist clipped the man full on the chin. The sentry on the next post came running just as Wagner hit the ground, unconscious.

"Sorry I had to do it," explained Taylor, rubbing his knuckles. "It's bad enough to have one jittery man to deal with, but to have the whole camp—"

The sentry's fingers tightened on Jim Taylor's arm. "Look!" he whispered, pointing. "He did see something—there against the skyline!"

"Wait!" ordered Taylor, as the other man would have leveled his rifle. He stared at the form outlined against the sky, clear-cut against the back light, with bare torso, leggings and—

"He's movin' his arms," said the sentry oddly. "I never knowed an Injun to do that."

Jim Taylor whistled. The sound closely resembled the low, penetrating call of a night bird. The distant form doubled over, came toward them on a run. The sentry cocked his rifle.

"Hold it, you fool!" said Taylor. "It's Dan Selkirk."

There was little about the man, as he wriggled through the brush, to remind one of the trail scout, Dan Selkirk. His naturally dark skin was burned the color of an Indian's. His beaded breech-clout and buckskin leggings were dirty and torn.

He grabbed Jim Taylor's hand tightly. "I hoped you'd be awake, Jim," he said hoarsely. "There's hell goin' to pop. I've been trailin' Buck Hayden for weeks. I've lived with the Redskins, accompanied them on their raids, always tryin' to get to the bottom of what happened when Buck's men were killed and—Bobby—"

There was a silent question in his voice.

"She's well, Dan," answered Taylor, sensing what was in the other's mind, "but I don't reckon she's changed her ideas a lot."

Briefly Dan explained why he had left the camp, to take up the trail of Buck Hayden, after discovering the flour in the breech of the Sharp's rifle.

"Hayden's only one of 'em, Jim," he said soberly. "There's been hundreds of guns, thousands of rounds of ammunition shipped west in flour barrels. Seems like every Injun between here and the mountains has a gun. Hayden and a dozen other renegades are leading isolated bands of raiders. A dozen outfits have been wiped out between here and Carson Pass. They're workin' back now." He looked at his partner silently.

"And we're next. That it?" Jim asked, with a steady voice.

Dan shrugged. "It's Hayden," he said. "Damn him, I've followed him for weeks, always two jumps behind him. My guess is he's layin' for this outfit, Jim, for two reasons. He thinks I'm still with it, and he knows that I know he killed Bobby—that much I learned from the Injuns

themselves. The raid on Buck's outfit was all planned. The Injuns were to kill his men, take the wagon with the guns, which they had already paid for, and Hayden was to join up with them."

He looked toward the sleeping camp a moment, and added: "And Bobby got in the way. Hayden killed him."

"How much chance we got?" the sentry asked bluntly.

Selkirk looked at Jim Taylor with a questioning glance.

"We've got fourteen men, Dan," answered Taylor, his eyes narrowing. "How's it shape up?"

"There's a hundred braves with Hayden. That's almost ten to one. They'll strike at daylight. We've only one chance. There's a troop of dragoons fifty miles west on their way back to Fort Hall for the winter. I sent word to them by a squaw I befriended. If she gets through we may—"

The inflection at the end of the statement was eloquently indicative of what he considered their chances to be.

"Rouse the camp," Jim ordered. "Square the wagons and turn the metal boxed ones on their sides in front of the regulars. Get the women in close. They'll be reasonably safe behind the metal as long as we can hold out."

In ten minutes the wagon train was in silent confusion. Fresh ammunition was broken out, extra guns loaded and laid beside the men at their stations. Dan got out of his breechclout and leggings, borrowed a shirt and a pair of pants from one of the wagons. In an hour they were ready, awaiting the attack that would come at dawn.

As he came to the fire for a cup of coffee, Dan met Rosalind face to face.

"I'm glad you're back, Dan," she said evenly. "I—I was wrong."

Hurriedly, he told her of what he had discovered, of what impended. She listened and seemed unafraid.

"It's the gamble we all took, Dan," she said when he had finished. "Bobby lost bravely. I hope I can do as much as—my brother. There's only one thing, Dan. If we—if we. . . ."

Her eyes raised to his, and she touched the six-shooter at his belt. "Save one—for me," she whispered, and was gone.

The gray line in the east began to show a touch of color. Tensely they waited.

THREE horsemen appeared on the crest of the hill. Even at the distance, Dan recognized Buck Hayden between two Indian chiefs. He was stripped to the waist, but his less muscular shoulders betrayed him for what he was—a renegade white man. He held a spear in one hand, and to it was fastened a white cloth. As they came closer, the emigrants holding their fire, Dan recognized one of the Indians as Chief Red Bear of the Brules.

"Better surrender," Hayden yelled as they came closer. "I got no fight with you, Taylor, nor with any of your people. I want Dan Selkirk and the Marvin girl. Give 'em up, and the rest of you are safe."

"Go straight to hell, you damned renegade!" roared Jim Taylor. "Dan Selkirk and the girl are both here. Come and get 'em if you think you're able."

"Dan," whispered the girl, "if you'll go with me—I—I wouldn't be afraid. Then the rest—"

"He wouldn't keep his word," Dan said.

He climbed up on one of the wagons. "Let Chief Red Bear step forward," he yelled. "Let Red Bear remember that many moons ago the white chief made medicine for his daughter, Running Fawn. For that, Red Bear made the white chief a blood brother of the Brules. Red Bear does not fight women. Let Red Bear promise safety for the friends of the white chief, and send forth his own white brother to uphold the bravery of Red Bear's young men."

What he said was true. Years ago he had doctored Running Fawn through a fever that had killed a dozen Indians of her tribe. But he wasn't going to trust the safety of the emigrants to any such blood brotherhood.

He stepped down off the wagon box. "Red Bear is a wily old cuss," he said. "If I can jockey him into sendin' Hayden out for a fight, it'll give us that much more time."

He seemed to realize all of a sudden that he was talking to himself.

"Rosalind!" . . . She was gone!

He crouched down and hurried to where Jim Taylor laid against the corner of a wagon box, a rifle in the hollow of his left arm, cocked, waiting.

"Where's Rosalind?" asked Dan, flinging himself down beside his partner.

Jim bent a puzzled glance at the other. "She was here a second ago. She picked up a pistol and started—Why, I thought she went back to you."

Then Dan Selkirk started out toward the space between the barricaded emigrants and the Indians.

"Good God! Rosalind! She's mad!"

Head erect, Rosalind was walking straight toward the Indian chief.

"Rosalind! Come back!"

He sensed what she was going to do. One hand was in a fold of her dress. He knew that in that hand she held a gun.

"Red Bear's white brave has asked for me," she said firmly. "Let him come forth."

The Indian was nonplussed. He had heard of the bravery of the white squaws, but never had he witnessed it.

"Surely the white brave knows not fear?" she questioned, adopting the stilted English that the Indian understood.

Dan Selkirk cleared the barricade in one leap, ran toward the girl.

"White squaw has courage," said Red Bear. "White brave no—"

He shouted a few words in his own language, and half a dozen Indians dragged Buck Hayden forth.

Dan turned to Red Bear and said, "For many moons I have hunted Red Bear's white brave. Let Red Bear not forget that once the white chief saved his daughter by white man's medicine. Let me fight the white brave!"

"Red Bear's young men are fearless," bragged the Brule chief, his eyes on the cringing form of Buck Hayden. "Let Red Bear's white brave prove this."

Dan bent over, whispered to the girl. "Go back, Rosalind! For God's sake, go back! Don't let them see that gun!" Her eyes were still on Buck Hayden. "He killed Bobby," she said dully, as if that explained everything.

Dan's fingers found the gun under the fold of her dress, wrested it from her.

"The white chief fights fair," he said to Red Bear, tossing the gun back toward the wagons. "Let Red Bear's white brave fight the white chief Indian style."

He took from his belt a knife and a buckskin thong.

Back at the wagons, somebody had jumped over the barricade, taken Rosalind back inside.

Stark horror came into the eyes of Buck Hayden when Dan Selkirk handed the strip of buckskin to the Indian. He knew what it meant—a fight to the death with cold steel, with their left wrists bound together!

RED BEAR nodded, and two of his braves grabbed Dan's wrist, lashed it to Hayden's. Hayden was terror-stricken. Even before Red Bear handed them the knives, he leaned against Selkirk, his hot breath on the other's neck.

"God, Selkirk!" he whispered. "We can't do that. Trick 'em! Work over toward your wagons. We'll both jump behind the barricade. The dragoons are on their way, Selkirk. If we can stall for half an hour—"

Dan flung his shoulder against Hayden, shoved him away.

"You dirty rat," he grated, "where's your nerve? That girl faced what might have been certain death—alone. Stand up and fight, damn you! I hope to God the soldiers don't get here too soon."

One of the Indians pressed a knife into the right hand of each of them.

Now Buck Hayden's back was to the wall, and in desperation, he slashed out as Dan threw his weight sidewise.

An Indian horseman galloped up, said something to Red Bear. At his order, two of the Indians grabbed the wrists of the combatants, forced them apart while Red Bear spoke. Neither of the combatants had drawn blood.

"Let the white chief not forget," Red Bear said, addressing Dan, "that Red Bear has always remembered medicine making for Running Fawn. The debt is paid."

While his two braves held the wrists of Dan Selkirk and Hayden, the old chief signalled his warriors and they rode off. Then the two holding the combatants released them and followed the other tribesmen.

Instantly Dan's knife swung, but Hayden countered with a jarring, butting drive of his head that knocked the Green River blade from Dan's fingers. The light of death was in Hayden's eyes as he jabbed out with his own knife. Dan ducked the flashing blade. Then his hard fist came up and caught Hayden square on the mouth, and his doubled elbow sent the knife spinning from Hayden's hand.

"Fate—or luck, Hayden," whispered Dan. "I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"We're safe, Dan! Safe!" mouthed the other. "I've got all the money for the guns. You can have it!"

Another blow from Dan's fist cut the words short.

Beating at each other, the two men struggled. The danger of the raiders gone, the members of the caravan gathered around. Grim-eyed, Rosalind watched. "He's had enough," she said finally. "Dan, don't kill him!"

"I'd hate to have the skunk-smell on my hands," said Dan, shoving the half unconscious form of Buck Hayden from him and unfastening the thong that bound their wrists together. "Uncle Sam will take care of him. We'll turn him over to the soldiers."

He threw Hayden to the ground, an expression of disgust on his face.

"Dan!" screamed the girl. "Look out!"

She flung herself at him, as the gun which Dan had taken from her and thrown on the ground roared in the hands of Buck Hayden. He felt her go limp against him, and hell burst within his brain. He flung himself on the renegade, grasped the hand that still held the gun, and twisted it with bone-breaking force until the gun was turned back on the man who held it.

"Damn you, I might have known—"

With renewed strength, Hayden jerked himself sideways, rolled. Dan spun with him. There was the sound of a muffled explosion between the two. Hayden's struggling stopped. There was a stain of blood on Dan's fingers as he stood up.

"He—shot himself," he gasped, breathing hard. "His finger was still on the trigger, and when we rolled—"

"Dan!"

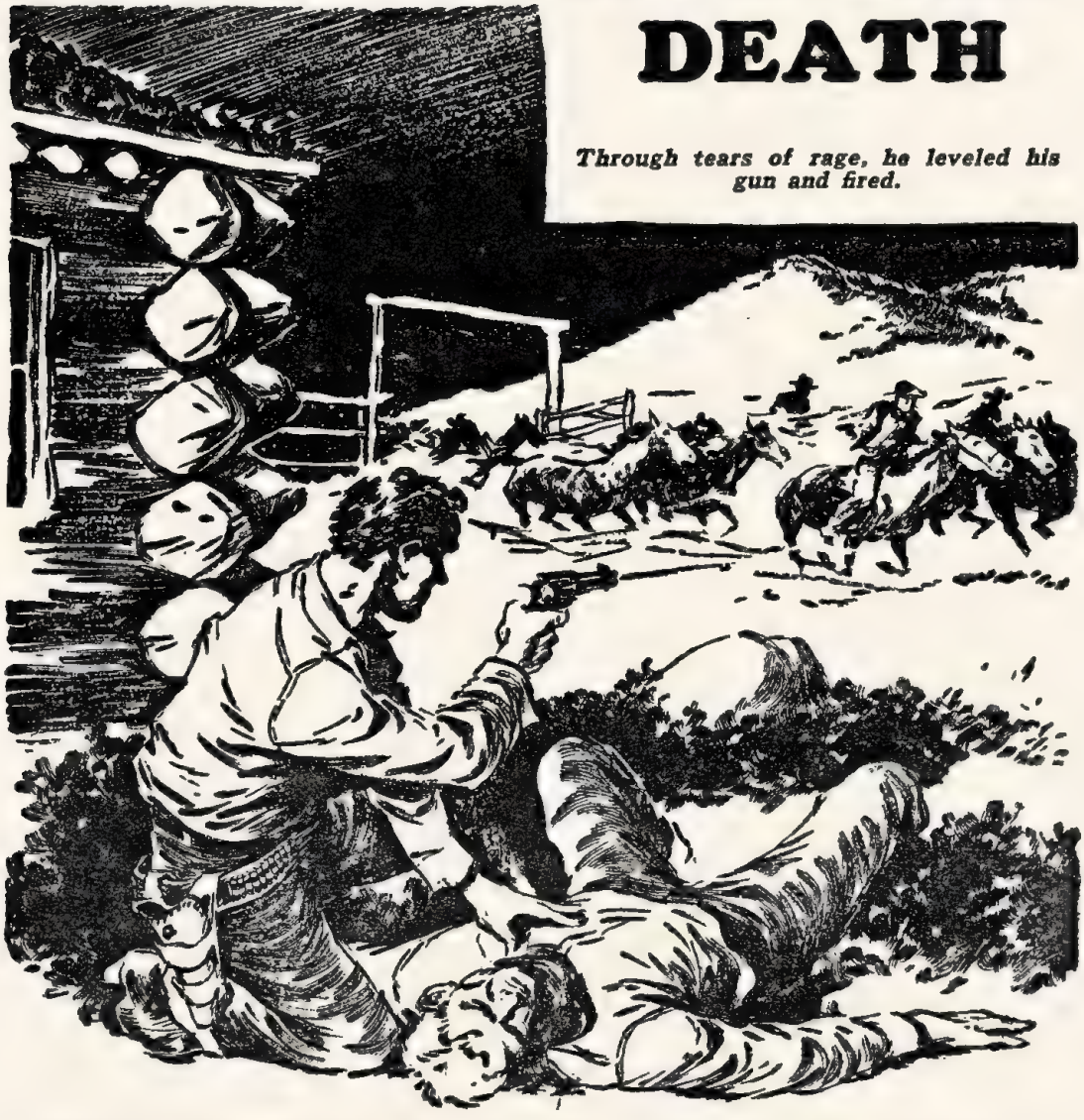
The cry was weak, but it sent Dan Selkirk's pulses pounding. He gathered Rosalind in his arms, patting tenderly at the flesh wound in her shoulder with the bandage someone handed him.

They were up-righting the wagons now. Someone started singing—for the first time in weeks.

"Oh, Susanna, don't you cry for me,
We'll be in hangtown 'fore de snow—
Jus' you wait an' see."

THE END

A MAVERICK DARES DEATH



Through tears of rage, he leveled his gun and fired.

Midnight raiders left Dusty Malone for dead, at the side of his murdered partner, there by the emptied horse corral. . . . But the merciless challenge that rang back from the outlaw hills called for a man with the iron-ribbed courage to live!

By GUNNISON STEELE
(Author of "Bounty-hunters Ride Alone," etc.)

SUDDEN wakefulness, like a burst of flame, came to Dusty Malone. Sitting erect in his blankets, the freckled, red-haired young horse wrangler strained eyes and ears into the pitch blackness of the dilapidated cabin where he and old Bill Ringo had bedded down for the night. His senses keened the night for whatever it was that had jarred him from sound slumber.

At first he could hear nothing unusual. The wintry wind, whipping down across

the Wyoming high country, moaned about the old shack. Old Bill Ringo snored loudly in his blankets on the floor beside Dusty. And from the pole corral fifty yards beyond the cabin, where they were holding the horse herd for the night, came sounds that seventy head of half-wild fantails could be expected to make.

Then, suddenly, Dusty Malone's lean body went tense as his ears picked new sounds out of the night. There was the trample of hoofs, then a rusty, squeaky sound, like an old gate swinging open. What sounded like the sharp swish of a rope across a pony's rump was followed by a squeal of pain and rage. A guttural voice cursed angrily, then chopped off into abrupt silence. . . .

Dusty Malone eased from his blankets, a chill feeling of disaster in his heart. Those stealthy sounds could mean only one thing—thieves were after the horse herd! Dusty crept to the one paneless window, peered out. And, at what he saw, that chill feeling deepened in his heart.

It was dark outside, the sky gray and overcast. But it was not too dark for Dusty to see moving, sinister shadows out toward the pole corral. He could make out four mounted figures. And quickly, efficiently, stealthy as wolves on a night prowl, they were going about their work. The corral gate had been flung wide. One of the horsemen had entered the corral, was hazing the fantails toward the gate with a flailing rope.

A snarl of anger on his young lips, Dusty Malone leaped back across the room to where Bill Ringo snored in his bedroll. He stooped and shook the oldster to wakefulness. Ringo rose straight up, pawing sleep from his squinty eyes and grumbling. But a sharp hiss from Dusty silenced him. Quickly, tersely, the youngster told Bill Ringo what was happening. He was dragging on his boots and strapping a gunbelt about his lithe waist as he talked.

Old Bill Ringo flung his blankets aside, growling angrily in his scrawny throat. Bill Ringo loved horses—and he hated horse thieves. So what he did was natural. He grabbed a long-barreled sixgun from his bedroll and, not even taking time to pull on his boots, plunged through the doorway into the night, to give battle to the skunks who were stealing his horse herd. Dusty Malone followed, gun in hand, his own anger rising fiercely.

The bleak wind cut into their thinly clad bodies as they cleared the cabin. But they didn't notice the cold. By now the last of the horses were leaving the corral, were stringing away across a flat south of the cabin. Now Dusty and old Bill could see four shadowy riders, urging the herd across the flat.

Bill's angry bellow split the night. "Hold up thar, you golrammed rustlers! What yuh doin' with that hoss herd?"

His answer was a lashing red tongue of gun-flame. A bullet screamed past their ears. Bill Ringo cursed as his gun snaked up and blasted. He started running toward the horse thieves, Dusty Malone hard on his heels. Both their guns were blazing and roaring. Dusty knew they were being foolishly reckless. But he would have followed old Bill Ringo straight into hell.

Above the roar of their own guns, he could hear the thunder from those of the rustlers. The night out in front of them blossomed crimson with writhing blobs of flame. Bullets screamed past their ears like angry wasps. In the gunpowder torches, he could see the horse herd, running a little wildly now, pounding across the flat. He could see the fierce, snarling faces of the rustlers as they sat their horses and triggered their guns. And those faces were familiar; they belonged to some gents Dusty Malone had seen and talked with the day before.

Old Bill Ringo stopped suddenly. He dropped his gun, and started walking

blindly in a little circle, all humped over and clutching his thin stomach. Then he sank gently to the ground, as though he was almighty tired. And he lay still.

Dusty Malone scooted on braking boot-heels as he saw Bill Ringo go down. Fear plucked with cold fingers at his heart. He'd seen a man fall like that once before, and that man had been dead. Dusty turned, ran back and stooped over the oldster's inert body. He put out a hand and touched Bill Ringo. Then he knew that old Bill Ringo would never wrangle any more horses.

Clashing emotions roared through young Dusty Malone. Grief, bewilderment—then fierce, killing hate for the gents who had murdered old Bill Ringo. Through tears of rage, he leveled his gun and fired.

Momentarily, the gunfire out there had slackened, and in the silence a harsh voice bit out savagely: "Let the kid have it, too! He's seen too much. There he is—cut 'im down, you gunies!"

Scarlet streaks of gun-flame ripped the darkness again. And, all at once, the world seemed to explode before Dusty Malone's eyes. Savage, searing pain slashed at his head. He knew that a bullet had hit him, that he was reeling in a circle, just like old Bill Ringo had done. Then the ground seemed to fly up and hit him in the face, and he didn't know anything else. . . .

THROUGH aeons of fierce pain, Dusty Malone fought his way back to consciousness. He lay awhile, staring up into the sullen, overcast sky, trying to remember. A weird gray twilight that he knew was dawn was sifting through the slate-colored clouds. The wind had died, and a deep, brooding silence held the uplands.

Gradually, as he lay there on the ground and fought the pain and nausea that rolled over him, he remembered. Then he got to his feet, and looked about. He saw just what he expected to see. Bill Ringo's cold, stark body lay on the ground where he had fallen. The gate to the pole corral gaped open, and the corral was empty. Dusty raked a hand bewilderedly across his young eyes, as if trying to wipe away an ugly vision. It was hard for him to believe that this awful thing had happened.

Dusty Malone was barely seventeen. He had received many hard knocks during those seventeen years, but never one quite so sudden and brutal as this. Bill Ringo was dead—the horse herd gone. . . .

Dusty Malone's father and mother were dead. Three years ago, he had run away from a bullying, slave-driving uncle. Since then, up till a year ago, he'd had a pretty tough time of it. "Too young," ranchers told him when he asked for a job. For two years he'd been kicked from pillar to post, begging, working when he could, battling to stay alive. Then, a year ago, he'd got into trouble with the law in Blackwater. Hungry, he'd tried to steal something to eat from a store.

He'd been caught, and if it hadn't been for old Sam Sterling, owner of the Boxed H outfit, he'd have gone to jail. Sam Sterling had interceded, taken the half-starved button home with him. He'd fed him, clothed him, told him he had a job as long as he wanted it. From then on, Dusty had almost worshipped old Sam Sterling. He would have done anything to repay Sam for what he'd done for him.

Bill Ringo had been horse wrangler for the Boxed H, and he'd stood up for Dusty lots of times. When Sam Sterling had told Bill Ringo to take a man with him and go up into the foothills to Saul Cleghorn's horse ranch and bring back some horses he'd bought from Cleghorn, Bill had picked Dusty Malone. That had made Dusty Malone feel proud as hell. They had spent the night in the hills at Saul Cleghorn's place, and early the next morning they'd started back to the Boxed H with the horse herd. They'd made it

to the old deserted cabin, and penned the fantails in the pole corral for the night. They'd wanted a safe place to hold the half-tamed horses, to keep them from stampeding over the range. Old Sam Sterling had had some bad breaks lately, and that herd of long-limbed cavvy stuff meant a lot to the Boxed H.

Now old Bill Ringo was dead, the horse herd gone!

Dusty stood there over Bill Ringo's body, fighting to calm the emotions that rioted through him. His heart was leaden with despair and failure. He couldn't quite grasp the enormity of the thing that had happened. In his mind he kept seeing the snarling faces of the rustlers as they had been revealed in the gunpowder torches the night before. Those faces had belonged to Bart Lash, Saul Cleghorn's foreman, and three of his riders.

Saul Cleghorn ran a tough outfit up in the hills. Contemptuous of law, with the surly disposition of a wounded grizzly, Saul Cleghorn had no friendships outside his gunslick riders, and asked for none. But he knew horses. And not even old Sam Sterling, who knew of Saul Cleghorn's crookedness, had suspected that the hills rancher would be bold enough to send his gunslicks to hi-jack Bill Ringo and Dusty Malone.

Now, for the first time, Dusty Malone noticed the odd hush that lay over the mesa. Dark, restless clouds lay banked along the northern horizon. Then, as he eyed the sullen cloud masses anxiously, a low moaning sound rolled across the plain, and a gust of icy air washed against his face. Dusty Malone's thin lips tightened. He knew the highlands—and he knew that a thing far more powerful and merciless in its fury than anything devised by man, was brooding out of the north.

WITH grim, tragic calmness, Dusty dug a shallow grave under a gnarled pine, and buried old Bill Ringo.

By now the black cloud masses had begun to rise. The low moaning sound had increased to a steady drone, and once again the uplands seemed to shudder as icy blasts of air swept out of the north. Dusty Malone knew the fury of the high country blizzards. He knew that only by a miracle could a man live through one of them without some sort of shelter. He knew that the only sane thing to do would be to stay here at the old cabin and ride the blizzard out.

But not for a minute did he consider doing that. That horse herd meant a lot to old Sam Sterling. Old Sam had trusted him and Bill Ringo to bring it through. Dusty knew he could never go back to the Boxed H and tell old Sam Sterling that he'd let rustlers steal the herd.

He turned Bill Ringo's buckskin loose on the plain. Then he mounted his own roan bronc and headed south, following the trail of the stolen herd. He had gone no more than a couple of miles when the writhing clouds swooped with startling swiftness, driven by screaming gusts of freezing wind. A weird, blue-black twilight settled, blotting the out-jutting spur of hills along the southern horizon toward which Dusty Malone was riding. Then a drift of sleety snow started.

Grim-eyed, Dusty Malone pulled the collar of his sheepskin coat higher about his neck, and rode on. The booming blast of wind became colder, the drift of snow thicker. Soon it blotted out all objects more than twenty yards ahead. But, for a while, Dusty Malone could see the trail left by the stolen herd. Then the swirling snow covered it. Still Dusty Malone rode on toward the hills to the south.

An hour, two hours. . . . Grim-faced, cold and miserable, Dusty Malone realized that he must soon reach some sort of shelter, or freeze to death.

He grunted suddenly, and grabbed for the saddlehorn as the roan snorted and shied aside. His head shot up out of his

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coat collar as something bumped against his leg.

"A hoss, by gosh!" Dusty Malone whispered.

Then other forms, white and ghostly with their covering of snow, loomed about him. Low sounds came to him from beyond the curtain of snow. A thrill of renewed hope ran through Dusty Malone. He knew that, by some miracle, he had blundered into the stolen horse herd as it drifted before the blizzard. But the herd wasn't drifting alone. Bert Lash and his three gunslick riders would be with them, maybe only a few yards away. . . .

A COARSE voice, startlingly near, whipped out of the storm: "Whup 'em up, you gunies! The hills ain't far ahead, and then we'll have plenty whiskey and grub."

The voice had come from behind him and off to his right. And now a second voice, shouting something, sounded up ahead. Dusty drew his battered old gun, straining eyes and ears into the gloom. But he could see nothing except the snow-covered horses that were pressing closely about him on all sides now.

Fierce triumph welled in Dusty Ma-

(Continued on page 103)

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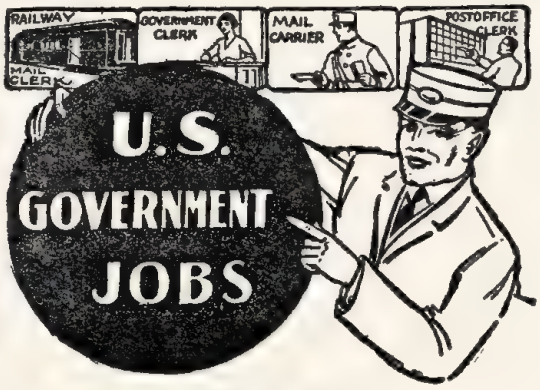

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Out-Trail Caravan

IT WAS nearly dawn. Because the light was dim, Scott Morgan had ridden almost up to the corral of the badlands rendezvous before he saw the thing that had frightened his big roan horse. It hung motionless from the high ridgepole that connected the tall posts of the open corral gate. . . . The body of a hanged man!

Even before he spurred his big roan close enough to make identity certain, Scott knew that the hanged man was his father. Tom Morgan had come to this place to meet his son. And his enemies had trapped him here. Tom Morgan, renegade, dishonored ex-captain of the United States Cavalry, had kept his long delayed rendezvous with Death.

Scott Morgan cut down the hanged body of his father—a grisly, nauseating task. Blood spattered the dead man's iron-gray hair and neatly trimmed mustache and beard. His hanging body had been riddled with bullets. His pockets had been emptied.

The place was deserted. At the cabin Scott found a prospector's pick and shovel. He took them, and selected a spot under the leafy branches of a giant cottonwood, he dug his father's grave.

With head bared, Scott Morgan stood by the new grave beneath the giant cottonwood. In a hushed, unsteady voice, he offered final prayer and tribute to his dead father.

"Sir, you have gone to stand your court martial before the Highest Judge Advocate. He who knows truth will judge you. May God in His mercy reunite you with our dear Martha. Amen."

"And Amen to that," spoke a voice from behind him.

Scott Morgan whirled, his hand on his gun.

It is the opening of next month's novelette by Walt Coburn, "A Man for the Badlands Night-Guard." Also in the January issue will be a complete novel of the legions of Mormon empire—by Cliff Farrell—and short stories and another novelette of Old West adventure and romance.

(Continued from page 101)

lone's heart. He rode on for a while, gun in hand, trying to plan some course of action. He couldn't ride on indefinitely with the storm-driven herd, he knew. But, now that he'd found it, he didn't mean to lose it. Obviously they were hazing the herd toward some shelter in the hills.

Dusty didn't know how that was going to help him, but he knew it was the only chance he had. He'd have more of a chance fighting four killers than he would bucking the blizzard.

A voice called, "That you, Bart? What yuh doin' over here on this side? I thought . . ."

Dusty Malone whirled. A horse and rider, looking like ghosts of the blizzard with their hoary coating of white, loomed up not fifteen feet away. The rider, a squat, black-bearded gent, was hunched forward in his saddle, peering through the driving snow at Dusty Malone.

"Yeah," said Dusty, trying to make his voice sound deep and guttural. "Yeah, it's Bart. What you doin' over here?"

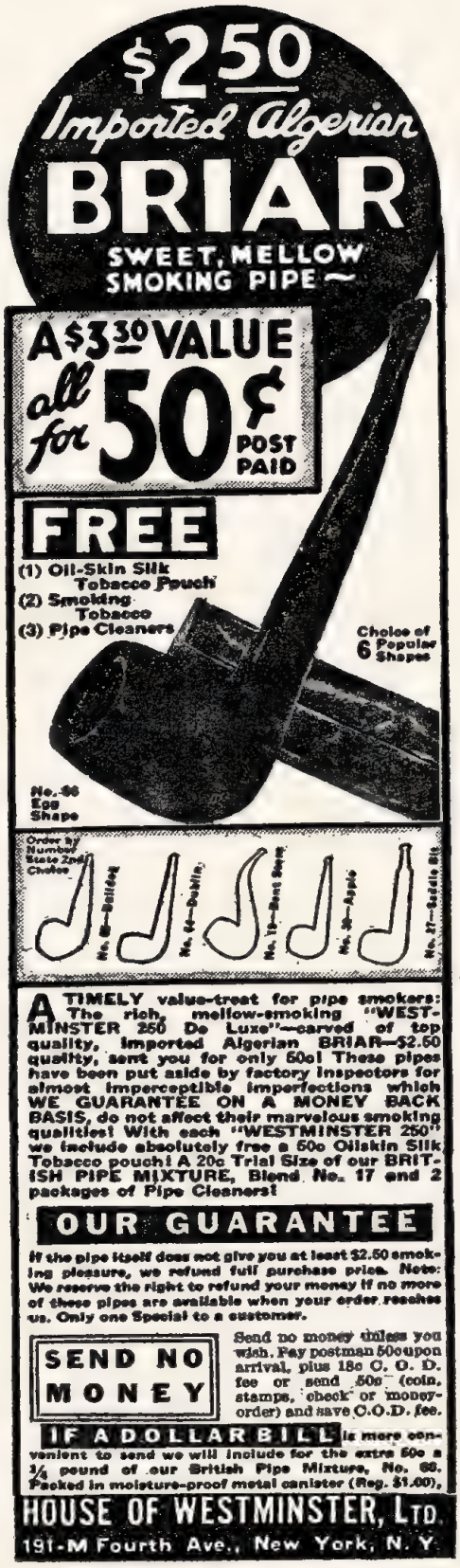
The squat gent jerked suddenly erect in his saddle, an expression of ludicrous amazement over-spreading his hard-bitten features as he stared at Dusty.

"Hell!" he squalled. "You ain't Bart. You're—you're. . . .

The squat killer clawed frantically for his gun, and its snarling boom sounded flat and lost in the raging blizzard. Dusty Malone acted instinctively. Jabbing spurs into the roan, he sent the startled beast lunging straight toward the rustler. Ducking under the red lance of flame, he straightened as he passed and swiped savagely downward with his clubbed gun. The gun-barrel caught the black-bearded rustler behind the ear, and he tumbled stiffly from the saddle. The fantails shied around the inert figure, and plodded on.

An angry voice came from off to Dusty's left. "What the hell you shootin' off your gun for, Jake—you want to start

(Continued on page 104)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(Continued from page 103)

these critters to runnin'? Haze 'em on. The hills ain't far ahead."

Dusty Malone rode on. He looked back trying to see the man he had knocked from his saddle. He hated to leave a gent like that. But he knew the man was only stunned. He'd come out of it in a little while. He wouldn't freeze to death. Maybe, Dusty thought, he'd be better off if the squat man *did* freeze.

He found himself at the tail-end of the herd now, and on the right side. Bart Lash, he knew, was off to his left. The other two, he guessed, were up ahead, guiding the herd on toward the hills hideout. Likely they had a hidden valley up there, and a cabin, where men and horses would have shelter from the storm. Probably this wasn't the first time Saul Cleghorn had pulled this same stunt.

Another half hour passed. The wind increased in fury. The driving snow became a million icy lashes that cut fiercely at Dusty's face.

Dusty didn't have any idea what he was going to do. Once the three killers suspected that he had taken Jake's place with the herd, he knew that his life wouldn't be worth a cent. Next time they wouldn't make a mistake, and the screaming of the blizzard would be his requiem. But there didn't seem to be anything else he could do. He didn't want to do anything else. Now, more than ever, he was determined to retrieve the horse herd for old Sam.

He gripped his gun tighter, and tried to see up ahead. But he couldn't see anythink except snow, and the backs of a few horses. However, he could tell by the increasing roughness of the country that they'd entered the hills.

At times they'd ride through hollows, where screening hills served as a windbreak. Then the snow wasn't so thick. Then he could see Bart Lash, a big, hawk-faced gent, riding along off to his left, with his head tucked against the driving

wind and snow. Once he caught a glimpse of the other two rustlers, riding along at the head of the herd. Then the wind came thundering in again, bringing a screen of snow.

With increasing frequency, the herd dipped into and out of ravines. The ground became rougher, the hills steeper.

Once one of the rustlers ahead shouted back, "We about thar, ain't we, Bart?"

"Mouth uh the valley's just ahead," Bart Lash called. "Lead 'em on, you buckos! Damned if I ain't about froze!"

The snow curtain lifted again, for a moment, and Dusty caught another brief view of the two riders up ahead before it closed down again. That gave him an idea. He spurred the roan forward. He rode past the herd, till he thought he was up close to the rider on the right. Then he eased forward, the gun in his hand hidden under his coat.

HE saw the rustler, riding along with his neck pulled down into his heavy coat. The rider was looking straight ahead; he wasn't expecting anybody to come up from behind. That made it easy. Dusty Malone rode up behind him. He took his gun from under his coat.

Somehow warned, the rustler, a lithe, black-eyed gent, whirled in his saddle. That same look of ludicrous surprise overspread his thin features as he saw Dusty Malone. He opened his mouth to yell, but no sound came. For just then Dusty's arcing gun smashed him from the saddle.

Dusty didn't look back. He didn't feel any remorse. These gents hadn't shown any mercy when they'd shot him and old Bill Ringo down. Dusty looked over to his left, and saw the other rustler who was riding point. The fellow was leaning forward in his saddle, peering ahead through the swirling snow.

The herd had been following a shallow hollow. Now the hollow narrowed sud-

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 105)

denly, and rock walls reared sheer on both sides. But, after a hundred yards, the canyon widened again, became a diamoned-shaped valley that was hemmed by towering granite walls. The valley floor was level, covered with brush and jackpine. Here, Dusty Malone guessed, was the sanctuary toward which the rustlers had been pushing the stolen horses.

Gradually, Dusty dropped back to the rear of the herd. Here in the valley the wind lost some of its violence, but he could hear it as it roared overhead.

"The corral's just ahead," he heard Bart Lash yell suddenly. "You, Duke and Joe, have the gate open and lead these fantails through it. Then we'll have whiskey and a fire in the cabin. Hump, damn it!"

Then, suddenly, the horses were crowding into a pole corral that was made of pine logs. Here the wind was muted, pounding out its fury on the rock cliffs directly above. And here the snow wasn't so thick. Dusty Malone could plainly see Bart Lash as he laid a coiled rope savagely across the rumps of the last of the horses. The other burly, red-bearded rustler was inside the corral.

He stopped his bronc at the corral gate, clawing snow and sleet from his eyes. He knew that he couldn't crowd his luck any further. In just a few seconds now, the showdown would come. Dusty knew that. And he knew that probably he was about to die. But he didn't regret the course he had taken. He didn't regret that he wasn't safe and warm in that old cabin many miles to the north, as he could have been. He was glad he was right here.

"It's queer as hell where Jake got off to," he heard Bart Lash say. "I saw him back there, not an hour ago. Mebby Joe'll know where he got off to."

The two came on toward Dusty Malone, and Dusty knew they thought he was the lithe, black-eyed gent he had clubbed out

(Continued on page 108)

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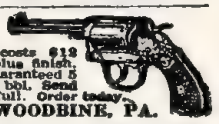

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(Continued from page 106)

of his saddle back there a while ago. They were looking at him. They were coming to ask him if he knew what had happened to the squat, black-bearded killer.

Dusty sat watching them, his hand, under his coat, clutching his gun. He had forgotten the blizzard. He knew that he was close to death, but he wasn't scared. In his mind he kept seeing a picture of old Bill Ringo as he walked around and around in a blind circle, clutching his thin stomach. He could see old Bill as he lay there on the ground, his sightless eyes staring unseeingly up into a sullen sky that was lighted by gun-flame.

Bart Lash and Duke, the red-bearded rustler, stopped their horses ten feet from Dusty Malone. They sat looking at him, their heads hunched forward. Dusty thought he saw the beginning of suspicion in their cruel eyes as they peered at him.

"Joe, you seen anything of Jake the last few minutes?" Bast Lash asked. "Somethin' queer as hell's goin' on here. I heard Jake shoot off his gun back yonder a piece. It wasn't like Jake to do that."

Still Dusty Malone didn't feel any fear. He felt only cold amusement at Bart Lash's puzzlement. His hand gripped his gun-butt tighter under his coat.

"Mebby Jake got lost," he said softly. "Or mebby he went on to the cabin, to get a drink and start a fire."

Duke suddenly pushed his bronc forward, staring with fierce intensity at the tall, red-haired youth.

"Hell, that ain't Joe!" he said. Then suddenly his startled voice beat up to a thin yell of amazement. "You're—you're that damned kid we beefed back yonder at the cabin—or his ghost . . ."

THE burly rustler grabbed for his gun, his yellowish eyes flaring wide with uncertainty as to whether bullets would be any good against this gent he was facing.

(Continued on page 110)

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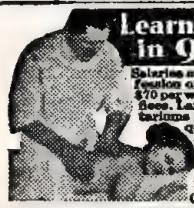

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(Continued from page 108)

But that didn't bother him long.

Lightning-fast, Dusty Malone's long-barreled old .45 came from under his coat. Powder-flame lashed out from its muzzle, straight into Duke's chest, driving him backward from the saddle.

Then Bart Lash's gun was roaring. Dusty reeled in his saddle as red-hot pain seared along one side of his head. Nausea rolled over him. Savagely, he fought the sickness and pain. Instinctively, his battered old gun snaked up again. He pulled the trigger, again and again, and the salvo from the bucking gun rose fiercely to a thunderous crescendo of rage. He pulled the trigger till the hammer clicked on empty chambers.

And, when the blizzard winds had wafted away the boiling powdersmoke, Bart Lash wasn't there any more. His frightened bronc was galloping away into the storm, and Bart Lash lay sprawled on the ground, his life's blood making a crimson splotch against the purity of the snow.

Dusty Malone looked down at the men he had killed. He was still sick and weak, and not entirely from the pain that coursed through his body from the bullet-nick alongside his skull. He'd never killed a man before—he hoped he'd never have to kill another one. But still he felt no regret. Regret wouldn't make old Bill Ringo live again.

Dusty Malone was smiling a little as he turned his bronc and rode toward the cabin back under the walls. It wasn't thoughts of the warmth and grub awaiting him there that made the freckled, red-haired button smile. He was thinking of the proud, happy light that would be in old Sam Sterling's squinty eyes as he came driving the horse herd up to the Boxed H two or three days from now.

"I reckon you'll make a hand, son," Old Sam would say.

Then Dusty Malone would know that, at last, a maverick had found a home. . . .

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28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
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31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
6.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
30x5.50-19	3.35	1.40
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
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30x5	3.65	1.65
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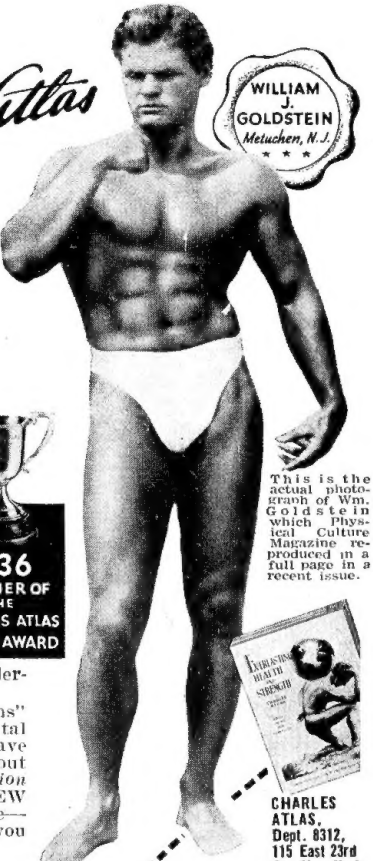

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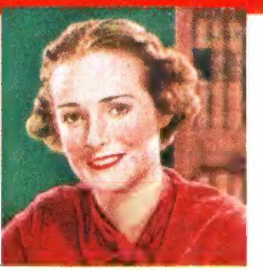

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